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Fire Emblem: Wings of Despair

by [RocGate13](#)

Summary

In another world, where Robin never lost his memories, the tactician joins with the Shepherds to fight the Plegians who threaten the peace of the Halidom of Ylisse. But Robin's past, and his bloodline, hold sway over his destiny. Will he remain loyal to his companions when a sinister voice in his head seeks to manipulate his every action? Or will dark forces lead him down a path that leads to naught but oblivion?

Notes

This fic will feature massive spoilers for Fire Emblem Awakening throughout (including this very summary), so be warned.

The story is a prequel to Fire Emblem Awakening; it is set in the original timeline of the game world, in which Robin killed Chrom and became Grima, leading to the bad future that Lucina came from. Thus, Robin retains the memories of his life before meeting the Shepherds, and the events that follow deviate largely from the events of the game. While certain chapters will feature dialogue from the game's script, many will not. The story will focus mainly on Robin, his role as a tactician, his relationships with the cast, and the events that led to him becoming the Fell Dragon and laying waste to the world.

I hope you will enjoy!

Chapter 1

The day my journey began was a bright, colourful summer morning. The sun had risen high above the fields of green that surrounded the small, run-down house I grew up in. The birds were singing in the blossoming trees, eager to begin the day ahead, while I was tending to the woman who had raised me from birth, as she lay on her deathbed.

The atmosphere inside the house was in total contrast with the beautiful weather outside. I almost wished the clouds would darken and the rain would pour down, scattering the birds from their nests, just so the mood would be more appropriate. Wasn't that how it always was in books? I chided myself silently for these ridiculous thoughts. Now was not the time for those kinds of notions.

Over those last few months, my mother had been growing steadily more ill. She was never any more than frail in all the time I had known her. In each of my childhood memories where I would run through the fields, filled with the energy of youth, she would be there, lagging behind and wheezing in exhaustion. But she would never let it keep her from being the mother I deserved. Even when her health began to fail, and her fits came more violently than ever before, she would refuse to stay in bed and let me be her caretaker. No, she would always attempt to fulfil her housekeeping duties, no matter how often she would cough and choke, or her legs would give out from beneath her. I wanted to admire her for that. But I couldn't bear to see this woman, with a will stronger than iron, to be so easily incapacitated by disease.

There she lay on her soft, feather bed, her body trembling and weak. I knelt by the bed and held her hand, a hand so thin and brittle I could feel her bones grinding together as I gave it a gentle squeeze. In her youth, my mother had been a talented swordfighter. But her physique had wasted away along with her health and now her body was thin, her skin stretched tightly over her skeleton.

She seemed to become aware of my presence. That was good. It meant that, for now, her turns and fits had passed. They would be back again before nightfall, and then she would cry out in her feverish sleep while I pleadingly called her name: "Elia," I would say, "mother, it's me." But she would never recognise my voice, the voice of her only son.

She turned to me now and whispered, "Robin. My boy, come here."

I drew closer and embraced her, for what I suddenly realised may be the final time. When I pulled back for a moment, she looked me in the eyes, with a fierce expression that reminded me of her more fiery youthful days. "I'm sorry you had to see me like this, Robin, my child." Her breathing was laboured, which affected her speech, but she carried on, determined to speak to her son. "I had feared this day would come ever since we left Plegia."

My mother would often make reference to Plegia, the land she had been born and raised in. It was also my own birthplace, although I have very few memories of the desert country. What little I remember is...dark and hazy, and not very pleasant. When I was but a child, my mother fled from her home, taking me with her. She escaped across the border to the Halidom of Ylisse, a nation ruled by a ruthless exalt that had led a scourge against Plegia relentlessly for many years. Only a few months later, the exalt died and his eldest daughter inherited the throne. From what I had heard from local villagers, the new exalt was almost the exact opposite of her father, and she strived hard for peace between the nations.

"Listen, my child, for I am not long for this world." My mother's voice was fair and even, but she seemed to become upset when she saw the look on my face. "I am so sorry, Robin. I am dying,

and when I pass on, I will leave you with no one to be near. But do not be afraid. You have all of your books and knowledge that I have passed down to you. They will help you find your way in this world. I have taught you as much as I can about the sword, and you have a natural flair for magic. You have the talent necessary to succeed. You will go far, my dear child.”

She broke out into a coughing fit, and I hurriedly ran to fetch more water. As she slowly drank deep from the cup I gave her, she sighed and said, “Water will not help me now, but thank you.

“When I pass on to the next world,” she went on, “I want you to leave here as soon as you can. Find a town or a village you can offer your services to. They’ll happily take anyone with your talent. Above all, you must form new bonds with others. I am sorry that I raised you in such isolation, but it was necessary for your survival. You may find it difficult to form bonds with people, but I want you to try. For me.” She paused for breath, anticipating another coughing fit, before continuing on. “This will likely be your last chance to speak with me. Is there anything you wish to know?” Her eyes twinkled. She knew I had always been a curious, intellectual child, always searching for more knowledge and information. I devoured books from cover to cover, and had read most every book we had in our extensive library. It had been my mother’s priority when she left Plegia to take as many tomes and books as she could from her home. Even when I was only a boy, she was planning for my future. For this day.

I pondered silently, searching my brain for the questions I needed to ask. Eventually, I came out with, “Why did you leave Plegia? Was it because of the war?”

“Partly,” she admitted. “But I had...another reason.”

“...Was it because of my father?” I asked and her face grew dark, as it often did when the topic of her husband came up.

“Your father,” she said, her voice hard as steel, “was a wicked man.” That, often enough, was all I was ever told about my father whenever I brought up the subject. Until that day. “He sought to use you, my child, for his own ends and schemes. I hated him and what he stood for. I could not bear to stay one more day in that evil land, and so I left, taking you with me.”

“If you hated him so much, then...why did you marry him?” I asked, and I almost feared for a moment that she would strike me. But her look of blazing anger was replaced by deep, deep sorrow.

“I was a fool,” she whispered. “A naïve, young fool with dreams of power in her heart. Although I was a famed swordfighter, I had powerful magic running through my veins. When this was discovered, it was quickly arranged for me to marry your father. He was a noble, you see: an heir to a most ancient and powerful bloodline that had long been connected to the royal family of Plegia. Your grandparents were thrilled that their daughter would be married into such a wealthy and influential house. I, too, was overjoyed. Your father, he...excited me in many ways. I won’t speak of that here, but needless to say, I did consent to marry him.” Her eyes filled with tears. “It was worse than any of my worst nightmares, the things he did to me. He didn’t want me for love, or even for power or money. He wanted me...for you.”

“Me?” I echoed, blown away by these revelations surrounding my birth. “Why? What did he need me for?”

“I cannot say, my child.” She shook her head as it lay on her pillow. “It is better for you that you do not know.” Her eyes seemed to linger for a brief moment on my right hand, which rested on the side of the bed. She continued on, “When I was young, I was a member of the inner circle of a very dangerous group called the Grimleal. Once you become a member of the Grimleal, you must remain so for the rest of your life. I left Plegia, my home, for your sake and my own, but it seems

they laid a curse on me, the results of which you see before you.” She coughed once again. “I raised you here in Ylisse, where I knew that Plegia, and especially the Grimleal, would never dare to come. And now, my task has finished.” Tears streamed freely down her face now, and I could feel my own eyes welling up. She raised her hand with difficulty.

“I am so proud of you,” she whispered, “of who you are. You are, and always will be, *nothing* like your father.” Her eyes fluttered closed and her hand dropped slowly to rest beside her head. “Be strong,” she breathed.

Those were the last words she ever said to me. She fell into a deep sleep after that. There were no fits, no coughs or turns. Her breath came easily for the first time in memory. She was at peace once again.

It was early in the afternoon when I noticed her breathing her stopped.

I was not an emotional child by any means. But that day, I wept until the front of my shirt was drenched with brine, until my throat ached and my lungs heaved. I curled up in a ball on the stone floor of my house and lay there until the sun set on Southern Ylisse.

After all my tears had dried up, I calmed myself, forcing the grief within my heart to retreat. When I felt sufficiently clear-headed, I began to pace the house. I would need travel supplies: food, water, books, maps, books, scrolls and more books. Spell tomes and a sword would allow me to defend myself if needed. As I packed everything into a satchel, I realised something: I didn’t know where to go, or what to do when I got there. My whole life, I had been depending on my mother. Even though I could cook, fight, read, write and so on, without the backbone and support of my mother, I was incapable of acting on my own.

I sighed, and shook my head. “I’m pathetic,” I said to the empty house.

I did not know what to do, but I decided to start by doing what I *could* do. My mother told me to leave the house and find my own way, even though it would be difficult. I trusted her with my life. Now that she had passed, I wanted to take her final words to heart.

But looking back, I realise that I was glad, in a way, to be rid of my mother. For as long as I could remember, she had kept me on a tight leash. I was forbidden to leave the house after dark, or to stray too far from home when I went on a walk. Most of the time, when I left the house, she would be right there by my side. She would hold my hand tightly, or cling to my arm after her health began to deteriorate. The first time I ever visited the local village was after my thirteenth birthday. The visit was cut short before we could finish buying the groceries. That was also the first time my mother had collapsed.

A small voice began to speak inside my head, whispering insidiously, almost too quiet for me to hear.

“She was a burden. You’re better off without her.”

I wanted to ignore the voice, but the temptation of freedom, of independence, was intoxicating. Finally, I could be free of this house - this shack in the countryside where I had been imprisoned. There was no one to hold me back. I could be unstoppable. I could be-

“No,” I said, feeling sick to my stomach. Where had these wicked thoughts come from? But soon, I found myself walking towards the door in the hallway that I had been forbidden to touch. As a child, I had quickly learned not to disobey my mother. She was a fiery woman when angered, in

more ways than one. But now she was dead, and unable to enforce her will upon me any longer. And so I opened the door.

Behind the door was a small room that looked an awful lot like a cloakroom, to my disappointment. But the room was empty except for a small, black bundle that was draped over a hanger. I reached tentatively out towards the bundle and felt the fabric with my fingers. It was soft and smooth to the touch. I pulled it off the wall, and examined it. The bundle of cloth unfurled to reveal its true shape – a hooded cloak of intricate design. There were golden buttons and fastening buckles on the front. The sleeves and collar were also hemmed with gold. All along the cloak were purple lines that formed unusual eye-like symbols along the sleeves.

I pulled it on over my tunic, and it fitted me comfortably and flawlessly. I felt instantly warmed against the oncoming evening chill. I discovered hidden pockets inside the cloak that would be perfect for holding books, weapons, food and more. It would be perfect for the journey ahead. I was speechless. Why had this marvellous cloak been hidden from me so keenly? Its design was unique: very different from the traditional Ylislean styles. It must have been taken from Plegia when we escaped from the Grimleal's clutches. But why? Why would my mother take this single item of clothing with her? After all, it would be yet another thing to carry on the long journey to Ylisse. I deduced that she would not have taken the cloak unless it was important. Maybe it was special to my mother in some way? A reminder of the country she was born in? Now that she had passed on, I would never know. I took the cloak with me, as a reminder of my mother, of my home, and of my newfound freedom.

As I walked back into the main room of the house, my eyes fell upon my mother's body, lying still in her bed. I went over and took her lifeless hand. I was so used to her skin being warmed by fever that I was taken aback by the feeling of cold flesh. My eyes caught sight of my right hand, which gripped my mother's limp fingers. For as long as I could remember, I had had some sort of tattoo on the back of that hand. Its six-eyed pattern seemed to glare at me always. Thinking back, my mother had been looking at the marking when she mentioned the Grimleal.

Perhaps, I thought, I should cover it up? After all, it may be connected to Plegia and the Grimleal. I decided to keep my hands covered whenever I could.

I wondered briefly what to do with my mother's remains; I couldn't just leave my own mother here to rot inside an otherwise empty house. But I also recalled the way she would shriek and cry out in her feverish sleep, her curse giving her nightmarish visions of being buried alive in the sands of Plegia, as she writhed and thrashed beneath the sheets. I wouldn't bury her. I couldn't do that to her.

I stood up once more, knowing what I needed to do. I managed to use the oil from the various lamps around the house to douse the place, using the reserve stocks we kept around the back when I ran low. Before too long, the air was foul with the smell of the black liquid that trickled along the floor. I picked up my mother's corpse and carried it outside, where I had the ladder waiting, leaning against the front wall. Holding my mother on my back with one hand, I climbed the ladder up to the roof. The thatched surface was not quite strong enough to support my weight, so I gently laid my mother to rest on top of the roof. I doused the roof with oil, just in case it didn't set alight fast enough, before climbing down the ladder once again.

I picked up my satchel from where I had left it lying on the ground. I had everything I needed to set off on my own, or so I hoped. The only thing I really needed right then was a Fire tome, to start the blaze. Although I was moderately skilled in magic, I currently had no Fire tome of any kind. I would have to make do, and so I pulled out my Thunder tome from the satchel. Although it wasn't ideal, the spell would still provide the spark necessary for ignition.

I flicked through the pages until I found one with words written on it. Once an incantation written

in a tome has been uttered, and the spell has been cast, the incantation's words fade from the tome, leaving a blank page behind. This means that spell tomes, just like weapons, can only be utilised a limited number of times before they become useless. Luckily, this particular tome was practically new, with only the first few pages left blank by use. The words themselves would look like gibberish to most, a collection of nouns and consonants written in a nigh-incomprehensible style. To learn how to read and pronounce these incantations can take years of practice. And even then, if one doesn't have a flair for magic, one may as well be reading from an ordinary book: no spells will be cast. Scholars speculate that magical ability may be genetic, while others insist that anyone can do it. Either way, true practitioners of magic and sorcery grow scarcer by the year. Very few people have that spark required to generate magical energy. Fewer still are able to truly dedicate themselves to refining the art until it can be used reliably.

I remember the first time I had ever cast a spell successfully. It was shortly after my fifth birthday, and my mother had been teaching me about the language of magic for some time. Although she had been a swordfighter at first, her innate ability for spell casting meant that she was highly adept at magic of all varieties. The day when I had read from that tome and a gust of wind had erupted from beneath my fingertips had been the proudest day of my mother's life, she had told me. Wind is regarded as being the easiest of Elements to cast, and soon I progressed onto Fire and Thunder spells. Thunder incantations were the most difficult to read and pronounce, but I favoured them above the other two types of Anima magic. There's just something about the rush of power one gets when casting a Thunder spell. I felt it that day, too, as I cast the spell that would set my home on fire, and burn away every trace of its existence.

I glanced at the open page and read the incantation aloud, the words carrying through the late evening air. I feared that I had mispronounced the guttural phrase, but almost immediately I felt the familiar charge of a Thunder spell building up between my fingertips. I splayed the palm of my right hand outwards, and felt a jolt pass down my arm and leave my body as a burst of energy. The Thunder spell passed through the open doorway of the house and ignited the oil on the opposite wall. The flames spread rapidly outward from the point of contact, and they devoured the interior of the house. For one brief, shining moment, my mother's face was visible in the glow from her pyre, and I could see the peaceful expression on her face, so beautiful even in death. And then the roof burst into flames, and my mother's body was lost from view.

I turned away from the place I had called home for over fifteen years, and walked off into the night.

Chapter 2

I felt the wind chill my skin and my bones. How long had I been walking for? It seemed like half the night. The sky had grown terribly dark, before being filled with beautiful stars, congregating together on this summer's eve. Although I was hesitant to bring my journey to a halt so soon after it had started, for a while I stopped to rest on a hillside, and I laid back to gaze at the stars. I knew all about the constellations and when they were at their most prominent in the Southern Ylissean sky. I had learned it all from a series of star maps and celestial globes that I had unfortunately had to leave behind in my former home. It didn't matter: I had them mostly memorised, anyway.

To the North lay Bantu the Venerable, a V-shaped constellation that supposedly resembled an elderly man, hunched over and wearing a cloak. At his side was Gotoh the Watcher. Together, the pair were referred to as the Dragons of the North, and were used by travellers to navigate these lands. Closer to the centre of the sky was the hero Anri, allegedly a distant ancestor of the Ylissean royal bloodline, in the act of slaying the Dark Dragon Medeus. Anri was represented by a large cross made up of nine shining stars, and a further four stars in another cross-shape that represented Falchion, the legendary sword of heroes.

To the West was a cluster of stars that was divided into three, shining figures: Grey, Cliff and Robin. That particular constellation had been named after a group of knights who were deemed heroes in Valm, a far-off continent across the ocean. I smiled fondly; perhaps I had been named after one of those great heroes? Not too far away from the Knights Trio was another bright cluster of stars: Alm the Mighty, another hero of Valm. Indeed, he had given his name to the continent, and to the nation that had once ruled over it, long ago. Connecting to Alm the Mighty was a smaller constellation that supposedly represented Alm's wife, Celica the Wise. Even as they lay in the heavens, they remained together.

I could have remained on that hillside for the rest of the night. I could have individually named the Twelve Crusaders of Jugdral that were clustered together to the East. I could have counted and counted until my eyes grew heavy and sleep beckoned me into its embrace. But fate, it seemed, had other plans.

Midway through admiring the Twin Constellation, I heard hushed, guttural voices coming from the foot of the hill.

"...less than five 'undred gold coins from tha' village..."

"...bloody...can't believe..."

Their words drifted up to me, the angry voices growing closer every second. I slowly sat up and peered down the slope towards the source of the noises. At the bottom of the hill, only a hundred yards away or so, I could see the flickering light of a lantern, burning brightly in the night and illuminating several crudely-dressed men.

Brigands?

My suspicions were confirmed a moment later, when one of the men said, "Alright then, 'ow many more villages d'you think we'll manage to get tonight'?"

Another answered, "Two or three, if they're all as weak as that last one."

There was a round of laughter and whooping, and I counted four or five voices. Still they grew closer and closer, climbing up the hill towards my silent form.

“‘ere, Boss, ain’cha gonna clean that axe of yours?”

A deep, gruff voice replied, “What’s the point, when I’m only gonna carve up some more maidens anyway?”

Another round of mean-spirited laughter reached my ears, much louder this time. They were almost upon me, but what could I do? If I moved now, they’d see me. But if I stayed where I was, they’d find me anyway. My best course of action was to run, and hope for the best.

I stood up quickly, far too quickly after having been lying down for so long. My head grew dizzy and I stumbled as I tried to run. Almost immediately, I heard one of the bandits call out, “Who’s there?!”

As I struggled to get to my feet, I heard heavy footsteps and then the group of bandits were upon me, surrounding me as I lay there on the grassy hill.

“Who’s this, then?” I heard the one with the lantern say, as he held the light close to my face.

The gruff-voiced leader spoke next. “What’s your name, boy?”

“R-Robin,” I squeaked, my voice strained with nerves.

“*R-Robin!*” One of the bandits imitated my voice and they all laughed maliciously.

“What’re you doin’ out so late, Robin?” one of the bandits sneered at me. “Don’tcha know that it’s dangerous round ‘ere?”

“Yeah,” another exclaimed, “you never know who could be lurkin’ around.”

“P-please...” I begged, but they mocked me by imitating me again, and I felt anger bubbling up inside me.

“Search his pockets,” their leader ordered. “He looks like a snotty, rich, Ylissean brat to me.”

“I’m n-not, I swear!” I begged, but one of the brigands grabbed me by the collar and pulled my new cloak off. I fell back to the ground, shivering, with only my undershirt and trousers protecting my skin from the cold air. Although I’d only had the mysterious coat for a few hours, I almost felt naked without it wrapped around me. The fact that the brigands had just deprived me of my weapons didn’t help matters.

The thug that took the coat rifled through the various pockets. He reached into one particularly large pocket and pulled out my Thunder tome. I cursed my stupidity: I should have used the tome to fend off these brigands before they could surround me like this. He flicked through the tome carelessly, clearly not understanding its value or utility.

“What the hell’s this?” he growled. “These pages’re all blank, like.”

“It’s my diary!” I spluttered, thinking fast. “I haven’t written anything in it yet! P-please, could you give it back?”

There was a round of laughter again, but none laughed harder than the man that held the ‘diary’. After his nasty chuckling had subsided, he threw the tome at me, hitting me square in the jaw with its thick leather cover. I cried out in pain as the bandits all laughed once more.

“Go on, take it, ya runt!” one of them jeered.

Thanking the gods for not having given these brutes an ounce of intelligence, I quickly flicked to an unused page of the tome and muttered the incantation. I was expecting them to take notice of my feverish whispering, but they seemed to be oddly interested in my coat.

“Hey, d’you see this?”

“...Yeah, I recognise tha’ marking.”

“But that means...this kid’s a...” The brigand holding the coat turned back to me, only to see my right hand crackling with electricity.

I heard one of the others shout out a warning, but before any of them could take action, I fired the spell straight at the fool’s heart. A bolt of lightning pierced his chest, causing his entire body to come alight with electricity. His muscles jerked and convulsed as the current coursed through him. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The hillside grew silent, as the brigands gaped at their former comrade’s smoking corpse, before they rounded on me once more.

“‘e’s a mage!” one of them cried.

“That’s right!” I exclaimed, crawling to my feet. “And this tome is more than powerful enough to fry all of your simple brains. Return the cloak, and my belongings, and maybe I’ll spare your lives.”

I tried to sound as sinister as I possibly could, and for I moment, I thought it had worked, but then the head brigand barked a laugh and his cronies followed suit. Did these idiots do anything except laugh?

“Nice try, freak,” he said. “But I think we’re more than a match for a scrawny, pretty-boy mage!” He turned to his underlings. “Kill ‘im!”

They all let out a bloodthirsty cry and charged at me. In my surprise, I couldn’t read out the next incantation in time, and one of the bandits swung at me with his axe. I ducked the first blow, but the second came around and hit me on the side of my head with the flat of the axe. Pain pounded in my skull and I collapsed onto the ground again.

A shadow loomed over me and I heard the leader say, “Pathetic! You’re nothing more than a weak little schoolboy! Prepare to die!” And he swung his axe down towards my aching head. I braced myself for the end, already hearing the hooves of Death’s ghostly steed coming to collect my soul...

Hold on...

...Hooves?

I could feel the vibrations of hoof beats against the hillside, coming this way. I opened my eyes a crack and looked up at the brigand about to bring about my demise. He had paused, and was also searching for the source of this new noise. I was unable to see clearly, as the pounding in my head caused my vision to blur. But I’ll remember what I saw that moment for the rest of my lifetime, however long that may be.

A tall, shadowy figure on horseback rose above the bandit leader, the lantern light glinting off of his steely weapon, which he brought up behind him before plunging it deep into the torso of the brigand. The bandit gurgled his final breath, and then the spear was pulled out and the man fell to the ground.

All around, there was pandemonium as the bandits rose up against this newcomer, but there were cries of pain from the others and I realised that there was another person also fighting them. I heard shouts and grunts as the battle raged and the pain in my head throbbed unbearably. I was about to pass out. But before I could let myself drift away, I willed myself to open my eyes and look upon the faces of my apparent saviours. It was too dark to make out the tall rider's features from where I lay, but I turned my head to the right and witnessed the clash between the remaining brigands and the other fighter. There was a sharp sound of clashing steel, and a single spark illuminated the face of my other saviour.

That was when I saw him for the first time.

He was a man - a young man - with hair as vividly blue as the sky. He was garbed in armour and cloth, with a worn cape billowing out behind him. His right arm and shoulder were bared, revealing some sort of marking or tattoo on his skin. And his face was youthful, yet so awe-inspiring and remarkable. His sharp, handsome features were twisted in a snarl of rage, his teeth bared in determination. But I did not feel fear to see this man as he struck down his foe. I knew that he would not turn his anger on me. His rage was aimed towards these evildoers, and no one else. Or so I hoped.

The young man let out a roar as he dealt the finishing blow to the brigand, and there was an explosion of sound and colour as my consciousness faded into darkness...

"...Chrom, we have to do *something*."

The high-pitched, female voice reached me in my waking state, filled with concern and indecision.

Another voice reached my ears, this one masculine.

"What do you propose we do?"

I heard the hesitation in the girl's voice as she said, "I...I don't know. But it's not like we can just leave him here! What if some more of those creeps come along?"

"Relax, milady," a deep, earthy voice reassured her. "The brigands we fought were the only such group in this part of Ylisse. If any more of those criminals *do* come here, they will have to march all the way from Plegia."

I opened my eyes into bright sunlight upon hearing the name of my birthplace. I looked up at the speakers, whom I instantly recognised as my rescuers from the night before, as well as a girl with blonde hair that I hadn't seen. She took a glance at my face, only to see my opened eyes. She gasped in delight and the blue-haired man turned and smiled, all trace of his earlier anger from the battle gone.

"I see you're awake now," he said, his voice full of humour.

The girl crouched down and spoke gently to me. "Hey, there," she said.

I saw the tall rider standing nearby, and I could see his face clearly for the first time. His eyes were fierce and piercing, his expression unreadable. He seemed to be glaring at me as I lay there on the soft earth.

“Can you stand?” the girl asked.

“Here,” the blue-haired man said, leaning down and offering me his hand. I took it, and he pulled me to my feet. His strength surprised me for a moment, but then I remembered the skill with which he took down the bandits that had attacked me. This was a seasoned warrior, despite his young appearance.

As I stood up straight, I was expecting to wobble or to feel dizzy at having gotten up so quickly, but I felt remarkably well. I raised my hand against the side of my head, where I remembered the axe-wielding brigand had struck me, but there was no lump, no bruise. I felt no pain.

“I healed up that wound on your head,” the girl explained, brandishing what I recognised as a healing staff. “How do you feel?” she asked.

“I...I think I’m okay,” I mumbled. I took the chance, now that I was on my feet, to examine my surroundings. I was standing in the middle of a beautiful, grassy field. The nearby trees were rustling in the gentle breeze, and they painted a picture of overall peace and warmth.

The young girl smiled. “You were knocked out cold by those brigands. Good thing Chrom was there to help, huh?”

Chrom. Have I heard that name before?

“I didn’t do *all* the work, Lissa,” the blue-haired man said. “Without Frederick, we wouldn’t have made it in time.”

“I only did my duty as a Shepherd, milord,” I heard the tall rider say.

I was finding this all a bit hard to process, so I turned to the blue-haired man. “Your name is Chrom?”

He nodded, “That’s right. Our serious-looking friend here is Frederick, and the not-so-serious one is my little sister, Lissa.”

Lissa scoffed, “Well, *excuse* me!” She rolled her eyes, “Ignore my brother, please. He can be a bit thick sometimes. So, do *you* have a name?” she asked.

“I’m Robin.”

“Well, pleased to meet you, Robin!” Lissa was full of cheer, and I couldn’t help but smile back at her.

“Where are you from, Robin?” the man called Frederick asked.

“I’m...from Ylisse. I live– lived nearby.”

Frederick frowned deeply, “You ‘lived’ nearby?”

“Well, I used to live in a house south of here. But I left home yesterday after my mother died.”

Lissa’s eyes widened, and she clapped her hands to her mouth. “Oh gods, Robin, I’m so sorry!”

Chrom also looked solemn, “Indeed. Lissa and I both know how it feels to lose one’s parents.”

“I’m alright, thanks. But...” I turned to face Chrom, “If you don’t mind me asking, do I know you?”

He smiled wryly. “You might. Have you ever heard of the Shepherds?”

Of course I had heard of them. The Shepherds were a group of elite militia who fought against any threats to the halidom’s safety. They were led, so I had heard, directly by a member of the royal family of Ylisse.

“What about them?” I asked.

Chrom smiled and Lissa stepped in, saying, “You’re looking at the leader of the Shepherds: Chrom, brother of the exalt and first in line to the Ylissean throne.”

I took a step back in shock. I couldn’t believe I was in the presence of a royal. *Two* royals, in fact, seeing as Lissa was Chrom’s sister.

“Chrom– I mean, sire! I didn’t -”

“Peace, Robin. Peace,” he said, “Just ‘Chrom’ will do fine.”

“What are the famous Shepherds doing here?” I asked in amazement.

Chrom’s face darkened, “Hunting down a group of brigands that crossed the border. They were going to blaze a bloody trail across Ylisse if we didn’t intervene.”

“Were they the brutes that attacked me?”

“The very same.” He nodded. “They were heading towards Southtown before we caught up to them.”

“So, if they hadn’t ambushed me, they could have attacked that town. You saved my life, Chrom. And Lissa and Frederick, too. I am truly grateful.”

“No need to thank us, Robin,” Chrom said with dignity. “We were only doing our duty to the halidom and its people.”

I winced internally, deciding not to mention my Plegian origins. Seeing as the brigands were also Plegian, and they seemed to recognise the design of my coat, it was likely that the coat was indeed taken from my birthplace. But why would my mother do such a thing?

“So...what will you do now, Chrom?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “We need to head back to Ylissol and report these events to the exalt. What about you, Robin?”

“...Truthfully, I don’t know. My mother wished for me to leave and find somewhere where my services would be of use. But I don’t know where such a place would be. I don’t know where to begin.”

“Hmm...” Chrom folded his arms. “If you want, we could take you to Ylissol. There are plenty of craftsmen there who are in need of apprentices. What do you specialise in, might I ask?”

I hesitated. “...Warfare.”

Chrom’s eyebrows rose. “Warfare?”

“Er, yes. I know a lot about tactics, and I’ve had an interest in strategy since I was very young. I’ve learned all about it since childhood.”

“From who?” Frederick asked, his frown even deeper than before.

“I, er...sort of taught myself.”

Frederick shook his head, “Milord, clearly this man has delusions of grandeur. We should take him to the nearest village and no further.”

Chrom held up his hand for silence and Frederick instantly obeyed.

“So, you’re a tactician?”

“...I’ve never fought in battle before, but yes. I am a tactician.”

“Intriguing,” he said. “We may have need of your services ourselves.”

Frederick protested, “But, milord, he’s hardly older than a boy. You would trust Robin enough to consider having him as the Shepherd’s own tactician?”

My heart leapt. “Chrom, sire, I don’t think I’d be capable of such a position.”

Chrom turned to me. “You say you’ve never fought before, but I saw how you dealt with those brigands earlier. You’re a mage, but I see you also have a sword. Are you trained in the ways of the blade?”

“Yes. My mother taught me...before she passed away.”

“I see.” Chrom nodded firmly, making the decision. “We’ll bring him to Ylistol. Even if he doesn’t prove himself capable of being a tactician, the Shepherds are always in need of new talent.”

“Are you sure this is wise, milord?”

“I believe in him, too,” Lissa piped up. “Frederick, you need to have more faith in people! You never trust anyone!”

“Not trusting people is my *job*, milady.”

“Come on, *pleeease*?” she begged.

“I do not see the merit of bringing this stranger with us.” Frederick sighed. “But if milord and milady insist, then I am merely your humble servant.”

“Yay!” Lissa jumped up and down, hugging Frederick and then me in succession. “Robin’s part of the family!”

“Calm down, Lissa,” Chrom said, unable to stop himself from smiling. “You need to save your energy: we have a long walk back to Ylistol. If we’re lucky, we’ll be home before nightfall.”

“We’re *never* home before nightfall!” Lissa complained. “Frederick always *insists* on setting up camp early.”

“I do nothing of the sort, milady,” Frederick said evenly.

“If you’d like, I could give you a piggy-back ride,” I offered her.

She spun around so fast she got dizzy. “Really?! You mean it?!”

“Uh...yeah, I do.”

Lissa let out another cheer. “Yes! I *never* get piggy-back rides! Frederick doesn’t even let me ride on his horse when I get tired.”

“Torva is no leisure horse, milady,” Frederick reprimanded her. “She is a fierce and noble mare, well-versed in battle. Only a trained cavalier could have the necessary skill to take her reigns.”

Lissa made a face. “In other words, you don’t think I’m capable.”

I glanced over at the horse named Torva, which was tethered to a nearby tree and chewing placidly on a mound of grass. Different entirely from the ‘fierce and noble mare’ Frederick so described.

Chrom sighed. “We talked about this before, Lissa: you can’t ride on Torva unless it’s absolutely necessary. Remember what happened to Stahl?”

Lissa winced. “Yeah, I remember.” Suddenly, she brightened. “But we’ve never talked about having piggy-back rides before, have we?”

“N-no,” Chrom stammered, “I admit, that possibility hadn’t occurred to me.”

“So there’s no reason why Robin can’t carry me back to Ylissstol, right?”

Chrom relented. “Alright. But Robin better know what he’s getting himself in for. There’s no man or woman in Ylisse that makes a more difficult passenger than Lissa.”

Lissa stuck her tongue out at her brother, before turning on her heels as quickly as she could while still maintaining her dignity, and walking over to me. I smiled and crouched down. She leapt onto my back with glee and cried, “Onward to Ylissstol!”

She was heavier than I had expected.

Chapter 3

Sure enough, the sun had hardly sunk down over the horizon when Frederick called our little troupe to a halt. The three of them immediately set out and began their routine tasks: Frederick started clearing the campsite and Chrom went off to gather firewood while Lissa clambered down off my aching back and unpacked the camping supplies. For a moment, I just stood in the centre of the clearing as everyone busied themselves around me, before I walked tentatively over to Lissa.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

She looked up, surprised, “Um...you could go find Chrom and help him collect some firewood. But maybe you should just help me unpack these bags, instead. You’ve had a long day, after all.”

I nodded. “Alright. I’ll do that.” So I sat down awkwardly where I had stood.

Lissa giggled. “Here,” she said, tossing a leather satchel to me. “Open that up and see if you can find some water.”

Feeling thoroughly embarrassed, I opened the satchel under Lissa’s amused gaze. Reaching down inside the bag, I pulled out a metal flask, full of sloshing liquid.

“Catch,” I called out as I tossed the flask at Lissa. Her eyes widened and she fumbled with the container when she reached out to catch it.

“Hey!” she protested, her mouth forming a pout. “That was *really* unnecessary!”

“Serves you right for laughing,” I said, folding my arms.

She shook her head. “You’re almost as bad as Chrom,” she said.

I scooted over towards her and said, “So, about Chrom, can you tell me more about him?”

One eyebrow rose. “Why don’t you ask him yourself when he comes back? He won’t be long. I hope.”

“Well,” I said, “he kind of intimidates me a little bit.”

“Really?” she asked. “He’s not so bad, you know. And he likes you, too. He thinks you’ve got a lot of potential.” She giggled. “And Frederick hasn’t stuck anything sharp and pointy into you yet. You must be something special!”

Frederick, who was now setting up the campfire, showed no reaction to Lissa’s words. Clearly he was used to being teased by his charges.

“Alright then,” Lissa said. “About Chrom. He’s strong and a fierce warrior, but you knew that already. He’s also very trusting of others.”

“I kind of figured *that* out, as well,” I said, smiling.

Lissa smiled too, before saying, “And once you have Chrom’s trust, it’s very hard to break it. He’s also my brother and I love him. Even if he does act a bit...tactless every once in a while.” Suddenly, she wagged her finger at me, her expression stern. “Now, don’t go telling Chrom about this little discussion, you hear me?”

I nodded quickly, and she turned around to face the tall man building the campfire. “That goes *double* for you, Frederick!”

I had a thought. “Frederick,” I called to him, “What do *you* think of Chrom?”

“What I ‘think’ does not concern you,” he replied, not looking up from the small bundle of sticks he had placed down.

“Aww, come on, Frederick!” Lissa whined.

Frederick glanced over with an annoyed expression, before sighing softly. “If you must know, I trust Chrom with my life. But not just because of his status or my own role as his protector. I trust Chrom because he is a true-born leader who is destined to bring greatness to the halidom, and to the world. Even if I were a lowly farmer, and he a simple craftsman, I would follow him to the ends of the earth.”

The campsite fell silent with these words, only the sounds of the birds and the crickets could be heard. Frederick seemed to bristle, upset he had revealed so much about himself, and he turned back to the campfire.

Lissa and I locked eyes, and I could see that she, too, had been surprised by Frederick’s words. Neither of us were able to say anything, and so we shared in the silence that now surrounded us.

A few minutes later, the sounds of footsteps and breaking sticks heralded Chrom’s return. But, what drew my attention was what sounded like several voices, engaged in conversation. Lissa, too, looked curiously over in the direction of the noises. Even Frederick seemed perplexed.

Chrom stepped into the clearing, carrying a rather large bundle of sticks.

“I got plenty of food and firewood,” he announced. “And guess who I bumped into while I was out?”

A woman stepped out from behind Chrom. At least, I thought she was a woman, given her breastplate and feminine face. But her arms bulged with muscle, and her hair was wild and untamed. She wasn’t like any woman I had ever seen before. She was dragging something behind her, but she dropped it behind a tree as she turned to give us a lazy grin.

“Evening,” she said, in a gruff voice.

Lissa stood up, her expression full of delight. “Sully!”

The woman, Sully, turned to look at Chrom. “You were all gone for so long, I thought I’d check up on you. I was passing through the forest when I found Chrom here, so he brought me along.” Her grin faded. “Well, me and *this* whiner.”

She gave a sharp kick to a nearby bush, which yelped, and out fell a slender man with silver hair. He leapt to his feet and bowed low before us, with as much dignity as he could muster.

“Please, allow me to introduce myself.” His tone was refined, and he had a strange accent that I couldn’t place. “I am he who strides large across history’s greatest stage, who puts the ‘arch’ in ‘archer’, who leaves naught but-”

“This *bozo* here’s been followin’ me around all evenin’,” Sully said with disdain. “He keeps tryin’ to pop the question to me.”

The silver-haired man sniffled. “Indeed. For such a lovely rose is this, that I would rather spend

the remainder of my days in torturous solitude than see her displeased!”

Sully groaned, resting her head in her calloused hands. “He keeps sayin’ stuff like that. I’m not sure he knows what he’s talkin’ about.”

“Aww, looks like someone has an admirer!” Lissa said.

But Frederick stepped forward in all seriousness. “State your name and purpose,” he said to the man.

“Ahem, yes, of course.” The man bowed deeply once more. “As I was saying previously, I am he who strides large across history’s greatest stage, who puts the-”

“Your name. *Now.*” Although he didn’t shout, Frederick’s voice carried loud and clear around the woods, frightening several birds away from their roosts.

The silver-haired man jumped, “Y-yes, sir! Virion. My name is Virion.”

“And why have you come here, Virion?”

“I came only because I follow this beautiful rose who calls herself ‘Sully’. Oh, how her radiance sears my tortured and yet remarkably elegant soul!” He knelt down and took one of Sully’s hands, kissing it lightly. Sully responded by punching him right in the jaw.

“That was just a warning, punk!” she yelled at him. “Next time, I’ll use my lance!”

“Take it easy, Sully,” Chrom said, his voice full of concern, before turning to the rest of us. “Sorry, everyone. This man lying on the ground here helped us catch our dinner.”

On cue, Sully bent over and took hold of whatever it was she had been dragging previously. She pulled something large, brown and hairy into the clearing, and I heard Lissa gasp.

Sully grinned down at us. “Not every day you get to eat fresh bear!”

Chrom stepped over the bear carcass as he addressed us. “We met this thing on the way back here. It tried to attack us, but Virion managed to kill it before Sully and I could even draw our weapons.”

I inspected the dead bear, only to find a single arrow lodged between the bear’s eyes, dead centre. I whistled in appreciation. “*One* arrow?”

“But of course!” Virion said with a flourish as he stood up. “What else would one expect from the archest of archers?”

“However flowery he may be, he’s certainly skilled with that bow.” Chrom addressed Frederick as he spoke. “One of the best archers I’ve ever seen.”

“I presume you wish to bring him to Ylistol, also?” Frederick asked wearily.

“You know me too well, Frederick,” Chrom said with a smile.

“Need I voice any concerns I haven’t already mentioned today?”

“No, Frederick the Wary, you need not. Instead, let’s sit around the campfire and eat.” Chrom spread his arms and said, “I hope everyone’s hungry for bear!”

I wasn’t sure at the time, but it seemed to me as though Frederick suppressed a shudder at

Chrom's words.

I hadn't eaten anything at all since before I had left home, almost two days earlier. The bear meat was tough but filling, and so I devoured chunk after chunk of the brown flesh as the others tucked in. Well, most of the others.

Chrom made a noise of satisfaction as he finished his meal. "It's been too long since I last had bear meat. Delicious!" He licked his lips.

Lissa, who was sitting with her arms folded next to her brother, had an uneasy look upon her face.

Chrom took notice of this. "What's wrong?" he asked her.

Lissa gingerly poked her portion of bear. "It's just...couldn't we have decided to eat an animal *normal* people eat for once?" She made a face. "I mean, come on! Who eats *bear*? You're meddling with the food chain. Right, Robin?"

She looked over to see me tearing chunks of flesh out with my teeth. I didn't reply.

She sighed, a little smile appearing on her face as she said, "I suppose a person would enjoy just about anything after not eating for days."

Chrom shook his head. "Just eat it, Lissa. Meat is meat, after all."

"Since when does meat smell like old boots?!" Lissa sniffed the meat before her, before gagging and saying, "Wait, I take that back—boots smell better!"

Frederick chuckled, his expression surprisingly gentle. "Every experience makes us stronger, milady. Even the ones we don't enjoy."

Lissa scoffed at the man's words. "Really? Then why don't I see *you* eating, Frederick?"

Frederick actually paled for a moment, and out of the corner of my eye I could see sweat beading his brow. I had noticed his reluctance to even touch the food in front of him. It seemed that even Frederick had his weaknesses.

"Me?" he croaked. "Oh, well... I'm not hungry. I...I had a large lunch!" He seemed to relax, satisfied with his own excuse. "Yes, quite."

Lissa was having none of it. "Yeah right, Frederick!" she exclaimed, as the others around the campfire laughed.

It was around this time that Sully, who had been sitting next to me, slapped me very hard on the back and said, "So, Chrom, who's the carnivore, here?"

This hypocrite's been eating with just as much gusto as I have, I thought, as I choked on the lump of bear meat I had been swallowing.

"Another newcomer," Chrom said. "His name is Robin, and he's a skilled mage and tactician."

"Or so he claims," Frederick interjected.

Chrom scowled at Frederick, before turning back to Sully and I. "Right," he muttered. "Anyway,

I'm bringing him to Ylissstol along with Virion. We can test his mettle at the barracks. Who knows, maybe he'll be our new tactician."

Sully grunted, "Is that so? Well, I trust Chrom, and he seems to trust you, Robin." She grinned as she extended her arm and pulled me into a crushing side-hug, squeezing me tightly. "Seems to me like we'll get along just fine!"

I squeaked, as the Shepherds burst out laughing at my discomfort.

"Don't worry, Robin," Chrom said to me, with a wry grin. "Most of the Shepherds aren't quite as...hands-on as Sully."

"Damn right, they're not!" Sully withdrew her arm and pounded a fist into her other hand. "I'd like to see the man who thinks he can keep up with me!"

Virion looked decidedly uneasy at her words.

After the meal was finished, it was decided we would all hit the sack. There was still a long way to go to Ylissstol, and we would be up at the crack of dawn, according to Frederick. The prospect of another day's march was daunting, and I felt my limbs crying out for rest. I'd wager the others were feeling the same, even if they didn't show it.

It was a warm summer's night, and with the campfire still burning strong we were all able to sleep out in the open, without sleeping bags or tents. Virion had wanted to sleep next to Sully. He had said something like, "This fair maiden's heart is warmer than any campfire. She shall keep these frail (and yet magnificent) bones warm through this deathly chill."

"Oh no you *don't*, buster!" Lissa had exclaimed, "You're sleeping where Frederick can keep a good eye on you!"

"Be warned, Virion," Chrom had said, albeit with a humorous tone. "Frederick keeps his lance by his side at *all* times."

Virion gulped. "Indeed. Very well, er...goodnight!"

I ended up sleeping next to Chrom. Sully, Lissa and Virion fell asleep almost immediately, but I had no doubt that Frederick would not let sleep catch him off guard. So I whispered, "Chrom?"

"What is it, Robin?" he whispered back.

"It's just...did you mean what you said? About letting me join the Shepherds?"

"Every word," he promised, before adding, "Just as long as you're not a pacifist." He chuckled quietly.

"...Thank you."

I slept well for the first time since leaving home. So much had changed since then, but I knew the biggest changes would be just around the corner. At one point during the night, just before I drifted off, a voice seemed to call to me from somewhere far away.

"*Soon*," it breathed. "*Soon*..."

I lurched awake, only to find everyone else was already fast asleep.

Chapter 4

I was aroused from my mostly-peaceful slumber at the crack of dawn by Frederick. The others were already packing up, with only Lissa seeming to be bothered by the early morning start. Her eyes were bleary and she gave a most unroyal yawn as she gathered up the various materials into her satchel. Sully and Virion had apparently gone on ahead of us, taking Sully's horse with them.

I sat up from the spot where I had slept, stretching my waking body with a yawn.

"Good morning, Robin." I heard Chrom's cheerful voice from behind me. I rubbed my eyes, clearing the sleep from them as he spoke. "You're a heavy sleeper. We were wondering when you were finally going to wake up. I wanted to wait, but Frederick insists that we get to Ylistol before noon."

"s alright," I mumbled, "I'm not tired..."

Chrom laughed. "You're a worse liar than me, Robin."

"And that's saying something," Lissa muttered, loud enough for me to hear. I let myself have a smirk as I got to my feet.

We marched north, reaching Ylistol just before noon. I liked to imagine that Frederick factored in the exact distance we had to travel in order to find the precise time at which we should start our journey so that we would arrive in the capitol just before noon. Hell, given what I know of Frederick, it was probably true.

I had never been to a city before. *Certainly* not one as large as Ylistol. And I had never seen so many people! Everywhere I looked, people were hustling and bustling around the busy streets. Dozens upon dozens of merchants were buying and selling their wares. And each person had a big, bright smile on their face. The buildings all seemed to shine in the morning sunlight. There was one building in particular that dominated the skyline and yet did not impose on the city, but rather added to its overall grandeur. I was beyond impressed.

"What do you think of our home, Robin?" Chrom asked. He was clearly amused by my stunned reaction.

I managed to pick my jaw up off the pavement and say, "It's incredible! I've never seen anything like it!"

It was true. The largest town I had ever been to was Southtown, and that was a run-down collection of buildings compared to the majesty of the Ylislean capitol. Not even my few memories of Plegia contained anything similar to Ylistol. I winced slightly, recalling how I had neglected to mention my Plegian origins to my new companions.

Frederick noticed straight away. "Something wrong, Robin?"

"Er...it's just...I'm so taken aback by all this." I told a quick half-truth. "It's a lot for a country boy like me to take in."

"Leave him alone, Frederick!" Lissa cut in, sparing me from further questioning. "He's tired from our long journey. And he's not the only one!"

Chrom smiled at his sister's attitude. "You'll be able to rest up at the barracks after we meet with the exalt."

Ah, yes, Exalt Emmeryn. I had heard much about her: even the people of Southtown had much to say about her wisdom and generosity. From what I could tell, she was one of the greatest leaders of our age. The news I had heard of her kindness and humility contrasted greatly with what I had heard about Plegia's king...

As we were passing through to the central plaza of the city, we encountered a great crowd gathering. There were cries of jubilation.

"The exalt has come to see us!"

"Lady Emmeryn has chosen to grace us with her presence!"

"Bless the exalt!"

We navigated around to a spot where we could see past the many people in our way. Sure enough, in the centre of the plaza, walking with grace and nobility, was a woman who had to have been the exalt herself.

Exalt Emmeryn was a beautiful maiden, only a few years older than Chrom or myself. Her delicate, refined features reminded me more of Lissa than of Chrom. I couldn't imagine Emmeryn being angry or violent the same way Chrom had during his battle against those brigands. In fact, an aura of peace seemed to radiate out of the woman. She was dressed in robes of gold and white, which seemed to only accentuate her royal appearance.

"So she's the exalt?" I muttered. "I never thought I would get a chance to see her up close like this. Is it safe for her to walk among the commoners so freely?" I asked my companions.

Even with several armed guards escorting the exalt, she seemed rather unprotected. But no one drew near, certainly not with weapon in hand.

Frederick explained, "The exalt is a symbol of peace: Ylisse's most prized quality. Long ago, at the dawn of our age, the Fell Dragon tried to destroy the world. But the first exalt joined forces with the Divine Dragon and laid the beast low. Exalt Emmeryn reminds us all of the peace we fought for then." His voice, although his tone was even, was filled with pride.

Chrom continued the explanation. "With Plegia poking at our borders, the people need her. She's a calming presence, when some might otherwise call for war."

That made sense to me. "Then the Ylislean people are indeed lucky to have her," I said.

Lissa giggled from beside me. "She's also the best big sister anyone could ask for!"

I couldn't help but give a chuckle of my own. "Yes, I imagine she is."

Shortly after that, the exalt gave one final, graceful wave to the crowd, before turning and making to depart from the plaza.

Chrom tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned as he said, "Emmeryn is going back to the palace. We're heading there now, so would you like to come along?"

I was startled. "Me? What for?"

"We're going to report the brigand situation directly to the exalt. You were involved as well. You can explain what happened to her."

"I...I don't know Chrom. I didn't do much."

"Come on, Robin," Lissa pleaded, "it'll be fine! Besides, as a future Shepherd, you might want to meet the ruler of the nation you'll be helping to protect!"

"Robin is not a Shepherd yet, Lady Lissa," Frederick reminded her.

"I know, Frederick, I know." Lissa made eye-contact with me, and I suppressed a grin.

"Alright," I said, "I'll come along."

By then the crowds were beginning to thin, and everyone was returning to their daily business. We were able to pass through the plaza and up to the palace. The palace was the towering structure that I had seen earlier as we walked through the streets. Indeed, it would have been difficult *not* to take notice of it, as it was by far the largest building I had ever seen.

We entered the palace, and we were escorted directly to the audience chamber by a pair of palace guards. When we arrived, the exalt was already waiting for us, with one of her retainers by her side.

The exalt smiled warmly at us as we approached. "Chrom! Lissa! Welcome home. Oh, and good day, Frederick. How fared you all?"

I felt as though I should be respectful in the presence of royalty, but Chrom was very relaxed as he said, "Well, we shouldn't have any bandit problems for a while."

"Wonderful." Emmeryn did not seem bothered by her brother's relative lack of grace and refinement. "And our people?"

"Safe as they can be, Emm," Chrom replied. "But we still need to watch the borders. The brigands we encountered crossed over from Plegia."

The woman standing at the exalt's side spoke up then. "Forgive me, milord. My pegasus knights should have intercepted them." Her formal, stern tone reminded me deeply of Frederick.

Chrom shook his head at the woman's words. "No, Phila," he said, "your duty was here, with the exalt. The brigands were no match for us."

"May I ask, Chrom," the exalt spoke, "who is this man you have brought with you? I do not believe we have met before."

I felt suddenly very exposed as all the eyes in the room turned to me.

"This is Robin," Chrom said. "He was attacked by the brigands I mentioned. He managed to fight back before they incapacitated him."

"Really?" Phila raised a single eyebrow at me, giving me a cool stare. "Perhaps this 'Robin' would like to give a report on the matter?"

I swallowed, but my throat was dry. "I don't think there is much for me to say, er, Lady Phila. I was out travelling several evenings ago, when I was accosted by a group of brigands. They took some of my possessions and I tried to get them back. I managed to get my hands on my Thunder tome and I used it against one of them. But before I could make my escape, they struck me down. It was then that I was rescued by Chrom and Frederick."

"I see. And why were you out travelling that particular night?"

“I had left home, and was seeking work in a nearby town,” I answered her. “It was on the way there that I encountered those brigands.”

Phila looked like she was about to continue interrogating me, but a gesture from the exalt made her hold her tongue.

“That will do, Robin. Thank you.”

“As you have heard, Emm,” Chrom said, “Robin is capable of defending himself, and he has told me he has an interest in warfare and tactics. I believe he will make a fine Shepherd.”

Chrom’s faith in me made me feel self-conscious, and I was unable to meet his eye.

“I see,” Emmeryn said. “So that is your intent.” She gave me a warm look that reassured me greatly. “Chrom’s clearly trusts you. As such, you have my trust as well.” She actually laughed gently before saying, “Although no doubt Frederick feels differently.”

“That may be true, Your Grace,” said Frederick. “However, my personal feelings have no bearing on this matter.”

“I thank you, Frederick, for your prudence. Chrom and Lissa are blessed to have so tireless a guardian. I do hope they remember to mention that from time to time.”

Frederick’s tone was completely deadpan when he said, “They occasionally express something akin to gratitude, Your Grace.”

There was a short round of laughter from the royal siblings. I was still too nervous to join in, but even Phila cracked a smile before saying, “Will that be all, Lord Chrom?”

“I believe so, Phila,” he answered. “We must return to the Shepherds and prepare them for their journey north.”

Lissa frowned. “Journey? What journey?”

“It was decided before we left Ylissol,” Frederick said.

“I’ll explain later, Lissa,” Chrom promised. “For now, let’s go back to the barracks.”

“Take care, Chrom, Lissa and Frederick,” the exalt said as we departed. “And you, as well, Robin.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

The Shepherds’ barracks were located only a short distance away from the palace. There was an entire district of the city set out for Ylisse’s various armies and guards. I arrived with Chrom and Lissa, with Frederick having remained in the palace. As the headquarters for the Shepherds, it was rather unimpressive, especially after just having been to the palace. The rooms were wooden and mostly bare, a consequence of its inhabitants being frequent travellers. There was a large common area where the Shepherds had gathered for lunch, since it was just after noon. Most of them showed signs of having trained through the morning. As we walked in, there were shouted greetings and cries of “welcome back”. As I had a quick glance around the room, a young girl wearing fine, pink clothing stood up and pranced over to the three of us. She ignored Chrom and

myself completely, grasping Lissa firmly by the shoulders and exclaiming, “Lissa, my treasure, are you alright? I’ve been fretting night and day since you left!”

Lissa, who didn’t seem at all taken aback by this girl’s behaviour, took the girl’s hands from her shoulders. “I’m fine, Maribelle. No need to worry!” She laughed. “You might start sprouting grey hairs!”

The girl named Maribelle huffed. “I should certainly hope not!”

A blonde, spiky-haired man stood up from devouring his lunch and walked over to Chrom. “Wassup? Heard ya’ve been fightin’ some thugs. Ya must’ve had a rough time out there without ol’ Teach and his trusty axe!”

Chrom laughed good-naturedly while Lissa looked over with one eyebrow raised.

“Oh, so you’re ‘Teach’ now, Vaike, is that it?” She laughed along with her brother. “And here I thought people were just born lacking wits. It can be *taught*?”

Vaike grinned and flexed his muscles proudly. It was then that I noticed he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“Never doubt the Vaike!” he exclaimed, before stopping mid-flex, and frowning deeply at Lissa. “Wait, was that an insult?”

There was a chorus of laughter from all present, except Maribelle, who simply tutted.

“Anyway, Chrom,” Vaike said, “are you ready for some serious sparrin’?”

Chrom smiled. “Maybe later, Vaike. Right now, I want to introduce you all to Robin.” He stepped away from me, inviting me to speak.

“Er, hi,” I mumbled. “I’m Robin. I’m new.”

“Pleased to meetcha, Robin!” Vaike said loudly, offering his hand. I grasped it firmly, and I felt his muscles moving in his arm as he squeezed my hand tightly. I gritted my teeth and stood my ground, squeezing his hand back. After about five seconds, Vaike broke out into laughter and pulled his hand free.

“That’s the first time in a while that someone hasn’t flinched!” he cried. “We’ve got ourselves a keeper, here.”

Lissa shook her head in distaste. “You’d be surprised by how many of our potential recruits are scared off by Vaike,” she told me.

“Wusses,” he muttered.

I laughed at the man’s antics. Maybe becoming a Shepherd would be more fun than I’d thought, with people like Vaike around. “Pleased to meet you too, Vaike.”

Maribelle made a displeased noise and then looked down her nose at me. It was rather impressive, seeing as how I was a good bit taller than her.

“Honestly,” she said, “I had hoped you were cut from finer cloth, Robin! You shouldn’t encourage Vaike like that!”

She turned on her heel and stormed out through a door on the opposite side of the room from where we had entered.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked Lissa and the others.

“Don’t mind Maribelle, Robin,” Chrom told me. “She’s just like that. She warms to people slowly, I guess.”

Lissa made an agreeing noise, before saying, “Or burns too quickly! But yeah, just give her time.”

“Thanks, guys.”

Just then, the door Maribelle had walked through opened up again, and in came two women. One of them I recognised as Sully, who shouted a greeting as she entered, while the other was a smaller girl with soft, brown hair and a kind, pretty face. Her eyes widened and she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw us.

“Captain!” she spluttered. “You’ve returned! I was- I mean, *we* were so...”

She suddenly sprinted across the room towards us. About halfway across, she tripped and took a spectacular fall, colliding headfirst with the floor. I winced sympathetically, while noticing Sully stifling a laugh.

Chrom hurried over to the poor girl’s side. “Sumia!” he cried. “Are you alright?”

He helped her to her feet and dusted her off. There was an uncomfortable moment where they just stood there, staring into each other’s eyes, before they visibly shook themselves and broke apart.

“I’m fine, Captain,” Sumia replied in a small voice. She was visibly blushing.

I made eye-contact with Sully, who gave me a knowing wink.

“Sumia,” Chrom said, “this is Robin.” He directed her to where I stood awkwardly.

“I’m new,” I repeated.

“Very nice to meet you, Robin,” she said politely. It was good to know that most of the Shepherds were kind people.

“Alright,” Chrom announced to the room, “spread the word, everyone. In the morning, we’ll be marching to Regna Ferox.”

Really? So soon after they had arrived back? I supposed the Shepherds must have been a busy group.

“So that’s what you meant by ‘journey north’,” Lissa whined.

Regna Ferox was a nation that spanned the entire northern half of the Ylissean continent. It was a place different entirely from Ylisse, or so I had heard. Due to the climate, there were vicious snowstorms there all year round. The country was governed by a khan, who was elected via tournament every couple of years. Many Ylisseans regarded the Feroxi as uncultured barbarians, but extremely capable warriors.

“That’s right, Lissa,” Chrom went on. “We’ll need the strength of the Feroxi to quell this new threat to Ylisse. Normally, the exalt would request such aid in person. But given recent events... well, the people might worry should she suddenly leave the capital. So the task has been passed to us.”

There was a round of murmurs around the room, which Chrom quelled by saying, “Now, this

mission is strictly voluntary. So if, for any-”

He was quickly interrupted by Lissa. “I volunteer!”

“Me too!” Vaike called out. “You’ll be needin’ ol’ Teach along for such a delicate mission!”

“What about me, Chrom?” I asked. “I’m not exactly a Shepherd yet.”

Chrom shook his head. “That doesn’t matter. Think of this trip as a way to prove your worth as a Shepherd. If all goes well, we’ll make you an official part of the team.”

I was pleased. “Thanks, Chrom.”

A nervous voice from somewhere to my left said, “I’ll go as well.”

I jumped, spinning around to find a man wearing a very large suit of armour, just standing out in the middle of the room.

“Wh-where did you come from?” I asked him, extremely alarmed.

“...I’ve been here this whole time,” mumbled the armoured man in reply.

Any further questions I might have had about the mysterious man were forgotten about when Sumia said, “I...I’m not sure I’m ready for a proper mission just yet.” She added in a smaller voice, “I’d probably just get in the way.”

Chrom looked a bit upset at her words, but he said, “You could stay behind the main group, and if a battle is met, just watch and learn? It’s your choice, of course. But some lessons can only be learned on the battlefield.”

“W-well, if you think it wise, Captain...”

Chrom smiled gently at the girl, and I suddenly saw the resemblance to his older sister very clearly. “Just stay by me and you’ll be fine.”

Sumia’s eyes brightened. “Oh, yes!” She blushed. “I mean- yes, sir, I’ll do that!”

They smiled at each other again. Sully and Vaike were snorting with laughter at the display, and even Lissa was giggling silently.

“Hey, Lissa!” I exclaimed, suddenly and loudly. “Maybe you should give me a tour of the barracks!”

Lissa caught my eye and exclaimed back, “That’s a great idea, Robin! Follow me!”

Chapter 5

The next day, I was woken up early again by Frederick. This would become a regular occurrence, I was certain. Today was the day the Shepherds were leaving for Regna Ferox, and I was to join them on their journey. I couldn't deny that I was excited, but I still felt out of place among the Shepherds. This was partly because of how the Shepherds acted as a unit, or even a family, all the time. The cooking rota, the cleaning schedule, the sleeping arrangements, everything was organised in such a way that everyone pitched in every once in a while. No member was valued over anyone else, except for Chrom and Lissa, of course. The whole thing was a tactician's dream. If this was how they acted *outside* of battle, was it any wonder they had such a formidable reputation among Ylisse's criminals?

I had been sharing a room with Vaike and Virion. There were three beds in the room, and Vaike had apparently slept by himself in there beforehand, owing to his terrible snoring. Since Virion and I were newcomers, we ended up taking the only free beds. But when I awoke that morning, I got up out of bed and almost immediately tripped over something large and heavy that had been lying next to my bed. I had to scan the floor two or three times before a quiet voice said, "Ouch," and drew my attention to a man who had been lying there on the floor. He was wearing a simple tunic. His face was so unimpressive and uninteresting that I nearly forgot about him again when I rubbed my eyes in disbelief.

"Uh...sorry..." the strange man mumbled.

"Don't apologise," I told him, confused. "I tripped over *you*. I think..." I frowned as I tried to place where I had met this man before. "Do I know you?"

"We haven't been introduced," he said. "I'm Kellam."

I shook his hand. "It's nice to meet you, but what were you doing on the floor?"

"I was sleeping," he said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Oh...but you're a Shepherd, aren't you? Don't you have your own bed in another room?"

"I always sleep in here. No one else puts up with Vaike's snoring."

"But...Vaike told me he sleeps by himself in here."

"Oh, he doesn't notice me," Kellam said meekly. "No one ever does." He didn't even really sound upset. He was simply stating a fact.

"Well," I said, "you *are* a bit...unremarkable."

Kellam nodded. "Even with all my armour on, no one ever notices me."

Something clicked in my head, just then. "I remember you! I saw you yesterday in the common area."

Kellam was startled. "You...you actually remember seeing me?"

"How could I forget someone wearing as much armour as you were?"

"Very easily," Kellam answered, in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Uh, right.” I decided to change the subject. “Are you coming along to Regna Ferox today?”

“I think so,” he replied. “I volunteered, but it’s not like anyone actually heard me.”

“I heard you.” An idea struck me, “If you want, I could tell Chrom that you’re coming along. Just in case he’s forgotten.”

Kellam smiled. “I’d like that a lot. As long as it’s not a bother.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “I’m sure someone of your...talent is of great tactical worth to the Shepherds. Chrom will *have* to bring you along.”

“Thank you, Robin.”

“It’s no problem.”

Just then, Vaike stuck his head through the doorway. “Hey, Robin,” he called, “who are ya talkin’ to?”

I looked over at him, and then paused. “I...don’t know,” I replied.

I heard a strange sound from behind me that could have been a sigh.

It was still relatively early in the morning when we started marching. All of the Shepherds gathered at a location just outside Ylissstol. I assumed that this was the rendezvous point for all of the Shepherds’ missions, given that they all seemed to walk there without question once they had eaten breakfast. I had to stop and ask for directions from Lissa when I saw her passing by.

“Oh gods, Robin, I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed once I had explained the situation. “I should have told you where the meeting point was yesterday.” She clapped her hands to her face. “I can’t believe I forgot about you. And Virion, too.”

I turned my head around to look at the silver-haired man who had been tailing me for some time. He was obviously trying to find out the location of the Shepherds’ meeting point as well.

“Who, me?” he cried. “Why, I was just leaving. I know exactly where the meeting point is! Er... well...I’ll be going now...” He edged away silently.

Lissa sighed in an amused way. “You’re going the wrong way, Virion.”

“Hah! This is merely a...shortcut!”

Lissa shook her head. “Come on, Robin. I’ll take you there.”

“Thanks, Lissa.”

She yelled at the dandy behind me. “And you’re coming, too, buster!”

She took us to the field outside the city walls, not too far from the Northroad that I knew led to Regna Ferox.

Only a few minutes after we arrived, Chrom stood up on a boulder and called out so that everyone could hear, “Is everyone ready? We’ve a long march ahead.”

There were a few last-minute preparations for everyone to deal with, so there was a great deal of bustling around for the next few minutes. Just when I thought we were about to set off, there was the sound of galloping hooves. I looked over towards the city entrance to see a knight in green armour coming towards us on horseback.

“Wait for me!” he bellowed as we moved out of the way of the oncoming cavalier. He rode up next to Chrom, and I got a better look at him as he dismounted. He was looking respectable in his shiny armour, but his bleary-eyed expression and chronic bed-hair gave the impression of a laid-back personality.

He wheezed, worn out from rushing out of the barracks and the city. “Why am I the last to hear about this expedition to Ferox?” I heard him complain.

Lissa overheard, too. “Huh? Vaike was supposed to...” He rolled her eyes and ran over to where Vaike was standing nearby. “Vaike! Did you forget to tell Stahl about our mission?”

Vaike thumped his chest. “The Vaike never forgets! I just don't always remember, is all...” He shrugged.

Lissa made a disgusted sound. “I swear, you'd forget your own name if you weren't always saying it yourself!”

Chrom dismissed the inevitable argument with a wave of his hand. “It doesn't matter now. Stahl, you can join up with Frederick and Sully. They'll be leading the scout team. Vaike, you go with him.”

The Vaike grinned and stretched an arm around the green knight's shoulder. “Good to have you along, Stahl, ol' buddy!”

The knight named Stahl frowned deeply, pulling his horse behind him by the reins. “That makes *one* of us. I was in such a hurry, I had to miss breakfast! There were muffins, and cakes, and biscuits like you wouldn't believe, and...” The young man's voice trailed off as the odd pair walked away up to where the other cavaliers were gathered.

Lissa and Chrom exchanged glances and then laughed.

“I guess some people never change,” he muttered. “But we'd better get moving. If we start marching now, we'll be able to reach the Longfort by dusk. Move out!” he yelled, and there was an affirmative response from the Shepherds. I was too hesitant to join in.

It was a beautiful morning on the day we marched north to Regna Ferox. Even mostly surrounded by strangers as I was, I still felt oddly cheerful as we trekked along the Northroad. Although that was partly due to the two siblings I had marching next to me. For royals, Chrom and Lissa were so down to earth that it was almost impossible not to like them. I laughed and shared jokes with the pair of them, and the atmosphere was as bright as the morning sun.

I took a quick glance around at the other Shepherds as we marched, and the sunlight glinted off of a hunk of shiny metal. I blinked, and recognised Kellam, back in his massive suit of armour. The poor fellow must have been practically boiling in there. I was impressed by his ability to keep up with us inside that giant suit.

I remembered my promise that I had made earlier, and I turned to Chrom to remind him that Kellam was coming along on the trip north.

“Hey, Chrom?”

His gaze met mine and I faltered. *What was I supposed to say again?*

“Is there something wrong?” he asked.

“I...there was something important...” I shook my head in frustration. “Never mind.” This must have been what amnesia felt like.

The prince smiled and clapped me on the back. “Don’t worry,” he told me. “I know you’re probably a bit nervous about all this. But I have faith in you, Robin. You’ll make a fine Shepherd.”

I was almost speechless, “Thanks, Chrom.” And so, I completely forgot about Kellam once again.

Only an hour or two later, we encountered trouble along the Northroad. The sound of hooves, heavy against the stone slabs, alerted us to the arrival of the scouting team. Sully, Frederick and Stahl all cantered past the other Shepherds and stopped before Chrom.

“We’ve got trouble, Chrom,” Sully said.

“Brigands, milord,” Frederick explained. “They have formed an encampment along the Northroad, likely to ambush any passing merchants or travellers.”

“How many?” Chrom asked.

“About two dozen, by my count.”

Chrom folded his arms. “A detour could cost us valuable time. And we can’t just leave these bandits to do as they please.” He nodded firmly. “We’ll fight them. Make sure everyone is prepared for battle.”

Stahl and Sully nodded, before quickly moving off and spreading the news around the convoy. Frederick remained to finish his report.

He pointed off down the road towards a forested area. “The brigands are located just past those woods, milord. There is a bridge that spans a brook, and they are not allowing anyone past.”

“What do you propose we do?” Chrom asked.

“Might I suggest a quick, tactical strike at the encampment’s centre? The element of surprise is in our hands. The brigands will be too stunned to react before we cut them all down.”

Chrom nodded. “That sounds good. Spread the word to the others and get our cavaliers ready to charge.”

I knew this was my opportunity. And just as well, too. The results had I not spoken up could have been disastrous. “Wait! I mean...please wait, Chrom.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Milord,” Frederick protested, “with all due respect, we must make haste.”

“Just a minute, Frederick.” Chrom gave me a glance, inviting me to speak.

I swallowed nervously. “Er, right. Well, I think that Frederick has underestimated these brigands.”

Frederick’s voice was steely. “I beg your pardon?”

I refused to be intimidated. Well, alright, I was a *little* bit intimidated. But Chrom’s encouraging gaze was all I needed to speak up.

“Look closely at the ground,” I said, pointing at the road beneath us and then using my finger to draw an imaginary line from our position to the bandits’ estimated location. “You can see that the gradient of the roadway increases; we’re actually standing on a gentle slope.”

“What is your point?”

“Judging by the angle of the slope, the brigands are situated on top of a hill. We’re standing at the bottom. If we charge along this road, they’ll be able to see us coming from quite a distance. They will have plenty of time to prepare an ambush.”

Frederick’s eyes narrowed, but he remained silent.

“But luckily for us, they have put themselves at more of a disadvantage at this particular location than they think.” I directed their attention to the woodland at either side of the road. “They’re almost entirely surrounded by forests. An attack from the woods will leave them reeling.”

Chrom’s eyes glittered as he listened to my words. “So, if we sneak around and approach through the trees, the brigands won’t notice us coming until it’s too late.”

“Milord, this plan is not entirely foolproof,” Frederick warned.

“I agree,” I cut in. “Which is why we’ll create a diversion. The woodland seems to circle around the back of the hill, so if someone were to draw their attention in *this* direction, their flank will be completely exposed.”

“Alright.” Chrom grinned. “So we’ll have someone approach them using the road, and when they prepare to ambush the bait, we’ll attack from the rear.” He shook his head in amazement. “If this works, you’re a genius, Robin.”

I looked down, feeling embarrassed. “It’s just a simple plan. Anyone could have thought of it.”

“But you’re the only one who stopped to consider it,” Chrom said. “And so quickly, too.”

Frederick’s expression reeked of disapproval, but he said, “Milord, who, may I ask, will be acting as the ‘bait’?”

“Well,” I said, slowly and deliberately, “it would need to be someone who is fast, and so would be able to approach the bandits’ location before they could fully prepare the ambush. A cavalier might do the trick.”

“Don’t forget, Robin,” Chrom interjected, “that if things go sour, the bait would have to be able to defend themselves. We’ll need a knight of great strength and experience.”

Chrom caught my eye and we shared a grin. “I think we have the perfect person in mind.”

We were still grinning about a quarter of an hour later, when we had hidden ourselves away in the woods. Frederick remained at the spot we had discussed. Everyone had been on board with the plan, and I could tell they were all a bit excited at the prospect of battle. Even though I was still grinning broadly at Frederick's displeasure, I was mainly trying to hide my own anxiety. What would happen if the plan failed? People could be seriously injured, or even killed, and it would all be on my hands. So this was the plight of being a tactician.

Chrom, Lissa, Stahl and I were making our way through the woods on the western side of the hill. On the eastern side, I knew, were Sully, Vaike and Virion. Sumia had elected to stay with the carts some distance back along the road.

As we traversed through the woods, we heard loud voices and laughter: the brigands. There was an element of timing to the plan. Frederick was counting twenty minutes exactly, and then he would charge on the encampment. It was up to us to be in position at that time, ready to strike.

I glanced over at Chrom, and whispered, "Do you trust Frederick?"

Chrom's eyes were firm. "With my life."

I would have to have faith in them both.

The bandits' voices grew louder as we approached. Suddenly, we had reached a large clearing in the forest. I knew this was the top of the hill. It seemed so peaceful at first glance, with the brook weaving silently between the trees. But the brigands had set up tents, camouflaged in the forest, and were brandishing weapons as they chatted amongst themselves.

We caught sight of Sully and Vaike moving through the trees on the far side of the clearing. They both gave us the thumbs up. Virion poked his head out behind a nearby shrub, with his bow in hand. I felt a jolt of excitement: everyone was in position. *The plan may work after all*, I thought to myself.

A cry went up from the brigands, and they all grabbed their weapons and held them close. Obviously, Frederick had begun to move. Beside me, Chrom and Stahl quietly drew their swords, and so did I. This would be my first true battle, I reflected briefly.

A quick glance at the other side of the woods showed Sully mounting her horse, with her lance primed and ready. Virion crept out of the shrub: he too was ready. Only Vaike seemed to be frowning uncharacteristically. He was moving his hands around his person, clearly searching for something. His face took on a panicked expression, one that mirrored mine as I realised what had happened.

"Vaike hasn't got a weapon," I hissed.

"What?!" Chrom growled from beside me. "I *told* him to bring his axe with him! What does that fool think he's doing?"

Stahl had now also mounted his horse. Everyone was ready to go, and the brigands were on the move. Frederick would reach the clearing soon, and we would need to strike before then. I had to make a quick decision.

"We can't afford to be held back now," I said. "Can Vaike manage without his axe?"

Chrom's eyes were narrowed, but he nodded. "Vaike is strong, even without a weapon. I trust in him."

"Do you trust in me?" I asked him.

He looked me dead in the eye and nodded again.

I swallowed. "Then let's go."

Chrom made a quick signal with his hand, and Sully nodded. The others on the eastern side began to move, creeping through the wood to the centre of the clearing. Our group moved in tandem, with Lissa keeping behind us. The brigands were concentrated towards the southern region of the clearing, and so their flank was completely exposed. They were ready to ambush Frederick as he approached, but were unaware of the approaching danger until Chrom roared, "Charge!"

And then suddenly we were running full pelt towards the brigands, weapons raised and shouting war cries. I didn't know what I was doing, but it all felt so...natural. Instinctive, even. Sully and Stahl were ahead, their horses galloping with great speed towards the bandits, who were now beginning to realise that they'd been had. They swerved around and sprinted towards us. It was all-out war in the peaceful clearing. The two cavaliers struck first, cutting down several of the foes in only a matter of seconds. Sully was even more ferocious in battle than she usually was, and her fierce roar rose above the din. Even Stahl, who had seemed very relaxed for a knight of Ylisse, surprised me with his strength in battle. Between the two of them, they managed to hold off most of the attacking brigands. Others made it past the cavalier pair, and they fell to Vaike, Chrom and me. Vaike, surprisingly enough, was faring remarkably well without a weapon. He struck with his bare hands, his fists stunning the foes before they were cut down by Chrom. The prince's skill with Falchion was awe-inspiring, as he struck down foe after foe with the holy blade. I was so caught up in watching him fight, that I didn't notice one of the brigands approach until it was too late.

The man raised his axe, and I moved without thinking, driving my sword into his chest up to the hilt. My movement were rapid and smooth, and I kicked the man in the abdomen as I pulled my blade out from his torso. He fell backwards, blood gushing out from his wound. His life was already over and so, with a quick strike, I slit his throat.

"Good job, Robin!" Chrom exclaimed as he drove his shoulder into the gut of a particularly tall brigand, who doubled over and left himself vulnerable to a strike from Falchion. Chrom severed the tall man's head and looked over at me. "You're a natural," he said.

I didn't have time to compliment him back, as another brigand charged at me with frightening speed. This time, I didn't even need to strike, as an arrow suddenly pierced the bandit's forehead and he collapsed.

Virion appeared at my side.

"Thank you," I said.

He tossed his silver hair. "'Twas a thing of beauty," he said.

By then, the brigands' numbers were thinning out. Chrom, Stahl and Sully had dealt with most of them, and when Frederick arrived on the scene, it was only a matter of minutes before the brigands all lay dead in the clearing. We had won. My first battle with the Shepherds had been a victory.

Lissa went around to each individual and checked their wounds. Fortunately, the only one who had sustained any real injury was Vaike, who naturally hadn't been wearing a chestplate or wielding a weapon.

I couldn't believe it: my plan had worked! Chrom came over to me and shook my hand. "I was right. You *are* a genius, Robin. The plan worked flawlessly."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't say it was *flawless*."

"There was nothing wrong with the plan that you could control." He shot Vaike a glare, and the blond man shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Nevertheless," Frederick said, "your idea was a success. I commend you, Robin." He gave me a curt nod, then left to attend to other matters.

Chrom's eyes were wide. "It's not every day that Frederick pays someone a compliment like that." His smile was broad. "I was right to place my faith in you, Robin. You'll make a fine Shepherd."

I bowed slightly. "Thank you, Chrom."

"Hey!" he warned. "No need for the formalities. You're my friend, and friends don't bow to each other."

A friend. The word sounded strange to me. I had never had a friend before, and now it seemed I was surrounded by them.

Lissa came over, also grinning broadly. "Great job, Robin! That was the least amount of healing I've had to do in a long time!"

"I told ya he was good," Vaike muttered.

"Yeah *right*, Vaike," the princess scoffed.

Stahl came over to join the gathering crowd. "So, does this mean that Robin is a fully-fledged Shepherd now?"

"He damn well better be!" Sully exclaimed.

"I think so, too," Chrom said. "From this day on, Robin, you're one of us." He clapped me hard on the back. "Welcome to the Shepherds."

The others cheered, and I was nearly overwhelmed by their trust and generosity. No one had ever treated me this kindly before, apart from my own mother. For the first time since leaving home, I began to feel like I truly belonged somewhere.

I was spared any further uncomfortable praise when the carts arrived, along with Sumia and another woman I didn't recognise. She was holding an axe, and her head was adorned with a tall, pointed hat.

"Look, Chrom," Lissa cried. "Miriel's here!"

Chrom was relieved to see the two of them uninjured, and he went over to the pair as I asked Stahl who the newcomer was.

"That's Miriel," he answered. "She's one of our mages, another Shepherd."

"Another mage..." I muttered.

Vaike overheard and laughed, "Don't try to get cosy with her, Robin! She's a frosty one." He snickered at his own joke, before catching sight of the weapon Miriel was holding. "Hey, wait a sec!"

He ran over to join them, and I could hear his loud voice as he said, "You found my axe!"

The woman named Miriel sniffed. “I wondered what manner of ignoramus would mislay their weapon. Now I know.” She handed over the weapon, which Vaike took greedily.

“Thanks, Miriel!” he said, before adding, “for the axe, anyway.”

“Beware!” Miriel said suddenly. “Next time, I’ll use a spell to fasten it to your hands...permanently.”

Vaike blanched, and he quickly turned from the mage woman and walked away.

Chrom was still talking with Sumia. He turned to face the gathered Shepherds. “I’m glad everyone is safe. But we need to get moving if we’re to reach Regna Ferox before sundown.”

“Milord,” Frederick said, “what shall we do with these corpses?”

Chrom frowned. “There’s no time to bury them. We can build a pyre instead.”

There were affirmations from the Shepherds, who all immediately set about gathering firewood and other necessities for the grim task.

I was with Lissa when she stopped and cried out, “Chrom, look!”

She pointed into the forest. Tied to a tree not too far from the clearing was a single, white horse. Not just *any* horse, I realised, as I noticed its beautiful silvery wings.

Chrom saw the beast, and his eyes widened. He put down the bundle of sticks he was carrying and walked over to us. “It’s a pegasus, all right,” he remarked. He stepped into the woods and approached the tree the creature was tied to. “Let’s just have a look here,” he muttered.

Although it was fettered, the pegasus bucked and whinnied as the prince drew near. Chrom jumped back, startled.

“Down, girl! Easy there!”

A familiar brunette ran past me and joined Chrom where he was trying to appease the pegasus.

“Captain,” Sumia cried, “one moment!”

“Sumia?” Chrom turned to look at the girl, with fear in his eyes. “Don’t come any closer. This beast is crazed!”

“It’s okay, Captain. I can handle this.” She looked more confident and sincere than I had ever seen her. Chrom, too, looked surprised, and he stood back to give the girl room.

Sumia slowly stepped over to the wild pegasus, making quiet hushing sounds. “Easy now,” she whispered. “I won’t hurt you.”

After a few more moments of struggling, the beast seemed to calm down, and allowed her snout to be stroked gently by the girl.

“Shh...”

I was beyond impressed. “How did she calm it so quickly?”

Lissa was also amazed, “That’s incredible, Sumia! But I should have expected as much from a pegasus knight like you.”

“Please, Lissa, I’m only a trainee knight.” Sumia was visibly uncomfortable at the princess’s words.

Chrom walked gently over to join his friend. “Even so, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Sumia shook her head at the praise. “It’s nothing, really. I just have a way with animals, I guess.”

“I should say so,” Chrom muttered.

There was a moment of silence, before Sumia said, “I’ll stay with this one. She deserves to be freed. Those brigands must have treated her terribly. You all go ahead and finish building the pyre.”

Chrom nodded. “Good idea.”

Within a few minutes, the pyre was built, and the bodies of the brigands were gathered up to be burned. Miriel cast a fire spell on the large collection of wood and branches that made up the pyre, and the blaze began.

I was uncomfortably reminded of how I had performed a similar ceremony only a few days ago for my mother. I turned away from the blaze and said to Chrom, “We should go.”

He seemed to understand my expression, and he nodded. “Alright. Let’s get ready to move on.”

Everyone began gathering up their things while Chrom went over to join Sumia again.

“Will the pegasus be able to travel with us?” he asked her.

Sumia frowned slightly. “Not quite yet. I still haven’t freed her from her bonds. I’m afraid that she’ll get spooked again if I do.”

“That’s alright,” Chrom said. “We can make time to wait for you.”

Frederick cleared his throat loudly at Chrom’s words. The pair ignored him.

“Thank you, Captain. But I can manage. Once I’ve freed this one, we’ll be able to catch up with you later. Every moment is precious when all of Ylisse is in danger,” she added firmly.

Chrom was reluctant to leave the girl, we could all tell, but he said, “Right, then. Be safe, Sumia.”

With those words, we set off once more, following the road north to Regna Ferox once more. By now, the sun was just beginning to lower, and I suddenly felt a chill even through my heavy coat. It was going to be a cold evening.

Chapter 6

It was nearly dusk when we caught sight of the mountains that separated Ylisse from its northern neighbour. At the mountains' base, I knew, lay the Longfort: a massive, wall-like fortress that spanned the entirety of the Feroxi border. The sky was filled with dark clouds, and I was worried that it would start snowing before we could get to the safety of the Longfort. But it turned out that it wasn't the weather we had to worry about.

Frederick was giving Chrom advice as we marched towards the fortress, going over the details one last time before we entered negotiations with the Feroxi. Although, from what I could tell from Chrom's expression, the 'advice' was more like a lecture.

"The khans that rule Ferox have grown quite wary of foreigners," he explained. "Still, don't mistake a lack of hospitality for open hostility. This simply calls for a bit of diplomacy."

"Yes, Frederick, thank you." Chrom's voice was weary. The last thing he needed after a long march was another speech from Frederick on diplomacy. "Negotiation is not my strong suit, but I'll do my best." He turned to address the Shepherds as he walked. "Remember, everyone: your actions here reflect back upon Ylisse."

Everyone seemed too tired to respond. I know *I* was exhausted. But things were only about to get worse.

A few hundred yards away from the Longfort, movements at the fortress were detected. The atmosphere seemed to grow tenser.

"Milord," Frederick warned, "it seems the Feroxi Guard are mobilising."

"What?! Why?"

"Who can say? But they look ready to let fly at a moment's notice. We'd best prepare for combat, just to be safe."

Those who heard Frederick's words spread the information around the group. Once again, I was amazed at how well the Shepherds acted as a unit, even outside of battle. The word was passed from mouth to mouth without any of its intent or meaning being lost.

This could be of tactical benefit, I thought.

As we approached the gates, the Feroxi Guard at either side of the portcullis drew their weapons, brandishing them at us in a threatening manner.

A female voice came from above. "Halt! Who goes there?"

Chrom stepped forward, tilting his head back so that his words carried up over the great wall. "In the name of House Ylisse, I seek audience with the khans!"

"Not another step!" the voice warned. "I have lancers at the ready!"

Confusion spread through our ranks. Why were the Feroxi so intent on opposing us?

Frederick took the initiative. "Hold, milady!" he cried, "We are not your enemy! Exalt Emmeryn herself sent us to discuss matters of mutual interest."

“My only interest is keeping you out of Regna Ferox, brigand!”

A vein pulsed in Frederick’s temple, but he attempted to keep his composure. “Now see here...”

“You think you are the first ‘Ylisseans’ to try and cross our border?” The voice barked out a laugh. “I have the authority to fell such imposters where they stand.”

Frederick snarled, all pretence abandoned. “How dare you!” he bellowed, “You are in the presence of Prince Chrom, the exalt's own blood!”

The woman barked out another laugh. “Yes, and I’m the queen of Valm! You do realize impersonating royalty is a capital offense, yes?”

A deep, heavy silence fell across the courtyard we stood in, as we realised that there was no way we were going to get out of this situation without conflict.

The voice spoke down to us once more. “Then perhaps we should settle this the Feroxi way. You claim to be the prince of Ylisse? Then prove it on the battlefield!”

Chrom growled in frustration. “Emmeryn won't like this at all.” He tried one last time to reason with the Feroxi woman. “Please, good lady! If you'd just listen to-”

But it was in vain. “I’ve heard quite enough!” the woman roared. “Attack!”

There was rapid movement at the top of the fortress, and suddenly scores of guards appeared with spears in hand. They all roared strange war cries as they hurled their lances down towards us. Fortunately, most of us were standing far enough away from the wall that we were able to move back, away from the deadly hail of spears. Chrom, on the other hand, was far too close to escape.

“Chrom!” I roared. “Watch out!”

There was nothing I could do. No spell came to me, and even if one had, I couldn’t have casted it in time.

But luckily, I didn’t have to.

Just as it seemed that all hope was lost, there was a familiar whinnying sound from above, accompanied by a white blur that zoomed through the air and collided with Chrom. The white object flew back up into the sky, taking Chrom with it, and the hail of weaponry that would have killed him struck the spot where he had been standing only a split second before.

The whole thing happened so quickly that I didn’t realise what the white thing was until I looked upwards and saw Chrom riding on the back of a beautiful, white pegasus. It was the same one that had been tied to the tree that we had found earlier. Then who would that make the rider sitting next to Chrom?

Lissa squealed with delight. “It’s Sumia! She caught up with us!”

I was stunned by the sudden appearance of the pegasus knight. Judging by the silence that fell once more along the fortress, so were the Feroxi Guard.

The pair were flying above the courtyard, out of the reach of the Feroxi spears. But they would come back down eventually, and then we would be back in the same situation as before, facing a fortress full of violent guards.

“Frederick,” I called, “we need to move.”

His eyes were still focused on the pegasus wheeling its way through the sky above. “But, Lord Chrom is-”

“Chrom will be fine,” I told him. “It’s up to us to continue the fight down here.”

“I...understand,” he said, eyes becoming firm once more. “What would you have me do?”

I was taken aback by his manner, but only for a moment. I scanned the fortress walls, searching for a weak spot. To my surprise, and relief, I found two. There was a small entranceway atop a staircase on either side of the great gate. But the staircases were rapidly becoming flooded with guards. We would need to move quickly.

I pointed out the small doors to Frederick, who nodded.

“I see. Such an obvious weakness...”

“If we can reach one of those doors, we could break it down and pass through to the top of the fortress. Our foe will probably be waiting for us there. Once we defeat her in combat, the Feroxi will stand down. If they are true to their word, that is.”

“I have never known a Feroxi to be a liar,” Frederick said. “Let us strike!”

Once again, I marvelled at how the plan spread quickly through the group. Everyone entered formation like they had practised so many times before.

Once everyone was in position, I said, “Alright, Shepherds. Chrom is counting on us. If we can get to the top of the fort and take down the spear-throwing guards, the way will be clear for Chrom and Sumia to land. We’ll win this day together.” I turned towards the fort. “So let’s-”

I didn’t manage to conclude my little speech, because I walked head-first into a large hunk of metal that had been standing in my way.

“What in the...?” I took a step back to give the large object I had just bumped into a cursory scan, only to find a blank face staring back at me. “Kellam?”

“Hi there,” he muttered sheepishly.

“Wh-When did you get here?” I asked.

“...I’ve been here the whole time,” he muttered.

“...Oh, right. Well, why weren’t you in formation?”

“Well, I was getting into formation, but then you walked right into me. So I had to stop.”

The conversation was beginning to make my head ache. “Okay...well, go join with the others. We’re about to begin the assault.”

He nodded and wandered off somewhere behind me.

“Alright, is everyone ready?” I asked, and was pleased to get an affirmative response from the Shepherds. In Chrom’s absence, I was in control. And it felt...good...

“Charge!” I bellowed, and the Shepherds bellowed right back as they advanced forward.

By this time, the courtyard was filled with guards, and so we cut our way through. Stahl and Sully

charged ahead, with Frederick remaining by my side. Vaike, Virion and Miriel took the rear, leaving Lissa in the centre, protected from any attackers. I had lost sight of Kellam once again, but I knew now that he was out there, somewhere.

I kept an eye on the guards atop the fortress wall, who were still aiming their spears at Chrom and Sumia as they soared above the battlefield. They were waiting for their opportunity: as soon as the pegasus drew near, or landed in the courtyard, they would strike. Although that meant that Chrom was still in danger, it also left the spear-throwing guards' attention completely diverted. The other Shepherds, including myself, were able to move around the courtyard without fear of attack from above, although we still had to concern ourselves with the guards flooding in from the doors I had seen earlier.

That day was my first experience of Feroxi warfare, and I couldn't help but notice the difference between the fighting style of the Shepherds and the style preferred by the people of Regna Ferox. 'Brutal' was one way to put it. 'Savage', another. Compared to the Feroxi guard, the Shepherds fought with delicateness and grace, except for maybe Sully.

They also seemed to favour heavily-armoured soldiers, who moved slowly, but were difficult to defeat in hand-to-hand combat. One of these Knights came close to me and swung his lance with great force. I leaped out of the way, bouncing on the soles of my feet, before launching a counter attack with my sword. The blade deflected uselessly off of the guard's armour, and he drew back for another strike. There was a sudden blast of blazing heat that I recognised as a Fire spell, and the guard was launched backwards. He tumbled over his neck when he hit the ground, and he didn't get back up again.

I turned to see my saviour, Miriel, already preparing another spell.

"Take heed, Robin!" she cried, "The foes in heavy armour are highly susceptible to offensive magic."

"I understand," I called back, over the din of battle. "Thank you!"

I gave the battlefield a quick scan, evaluating our chances. So far, everything was going well, considering we were down a leader. But I knew that the Longfort was teeming with guards. It wouldn't be long before reinforcements arrived, and we could very easily be overpowered by superior numbers.

A shadow passed over me, and I saw Sumia's new pegasus swoop down near the ground. Chrom was sitting behind her on the beast's back, Falchion outstretched, and he cleaved a particularly tenacious guard's head from his shoulders. Before the hail of spears could arrive once again, they were gone, lifting up into the sky.

Something clicked in my head just then. The way Chrom and Sumia had acted as a unit, it was truly something to behold. It made me think to myself, *Could the others work in pairs the same way?*

Naturally, it would work best with people who had chemistry with each other. No one could deny the attraction between Chrom and Sumia, and that likely added to their dynamic as a pair in battle. But people could also be paired based on their strengths and weaknesses, or on their battle experience. Pairing newcomers with veterans could be an interesting experiment. It might also allow quicker soldiers to ferry slower units greater distances.

My mind was whirling, faster than I could have believed, as I considered the possibilities of pairing-up in battle. It wouldn't always be ideal, but wouldn't two heads be better than one? Sometimes, it's important to consider the obvious before getting into the more complex details.

I considered the two young cavaliers of the Shepherds. Sully and Stahl were on opposite ends of the courtyard, fending off any guards who attempted to enter. I had been studying them both over the last battle as well, and a few interesting pieces of information had cropped up. For instance, even though they were both cavaliers, and therefore similar in battle, I had taken note of some differences between the two and their fighting styles.

Sully was fierce and impulsive, favouring quick, decisive strikes against careful consideration. Stahl, on the other hand, was more patient with his attacks. They had minor flaws, but flaws nonetheless. However, if they were brought together...

I was certain of it. This would turn the tide of any battle.

I ran over to Stahl, who had just finished a brief duel with an axe-wielding guard.

"I need you to go over to Sully, and stick with her. Don't let her out of your sight, got that?"

To my relief, he nodded, but looked a bit confused. He opened his mouth to voice a concern, but I cut him off. "I'll explain in a moment. Go!"

He nodded again, before racing off towards Sully.

"Frederick!" I called out for the knight, who appeared on his horse beside me almost immediately.

"What is it?"

I was feeling drained: two battles in one day would do that to a person. But Frederick seemed to hardly have broken a sweat. His endurance impressed me.

"I need you to help me up," I told him.

He raised a concerned eyebrow. "Up'?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "Up on your horse."

He instantly narrowed his eyes. "Torva is no cart horse. I cannot allow you to take hold of her reins."

"No." I shook my head. "I don't want to take *control*. I just need you to let me up behind you."

"What have you planned?" His tone was full of suspicion.

"You're an integral part of this plan," I explained. "If I can sit next to you on Torva, I'll be able to give you orders more quickly."

Frederick was still as wary as his nickname would suggest.

"Please, Frederick?" I begged him. "For Chrom's sake?"

He relented at last, reaching an arm down towards me. I grasped his wrist firmly and he pulled me up on the horse's back.

As I lowered myself onto the saddle, he muttered darkly, "You had better know what you are doing, *tactician*."

I relished the title. "Trust me," I said. "I won't let anyone get hurt. Least of all Chrom or Lissa."

I explained to him what I had told Stahl to do with Sully.

“Are you mad?” he asked, pulling hard on the reins and turning the mare towards the cavalier couple. “You would concentrate the efforts of our most mobile warriors?”

“It’s all part of the plan, Frederick.”

He didn’t pass comment, having engaged himself in cutting down a guard that stood in our path.

We reached the pair of mounted knights, and Sully called over to me. “Hey, Robin, what’s the deal with this? Why are you pairing me up with Stahl?”

“I saw the way Chrom and Sumia fought together and it gave me an idea,” I explained. “If two of us combined our efforts, we could perform twice the work, right?” I directed their attention to the doors leading to the fortress roof. “Sully or Stahl could never hold one of those entranceways by themselves. But, with their strength combined, they may stand a chance.”

“A *chance*?” Frederick was sceptical. “You would leave a person’s life to fortune?”

“Not fortune,” I said. “Fate. It is our destiny to win this day. Can’t you feel it?”

Sully shrugged, “I dunno about this ‘destiny’ stuff, but I like the idea of teaming up with Stahl. I ain’t too proud to have my friends help me out every once in a while.”

“I agree,” Stahl said. “I feel more confident when Sully has my back.”

Sully grinned. “Stick with me, partner. With the two of us working together, these Feroxi bastards don’t have a hope in hell!”

I grinned as well. “Then it’s settled. You two, head up those steps and see if you can break down the door. Frederick and I will take the other side.”

Around us, the battle raged on, although the courtyard was much quieter than it had seemed only a few minutes ago. Vaike, Miriel and Virion were still putting up a good fight, with Lissa keeping out of harm’s way and pitching in whenever one of them was injured.

“Miriell!” I called out to the mage. “Go with Stahl and Sully! Virion, you too! Vaike and Lissa, with us!”

They understood, adapting to my orders quickly. I knew I was forgetting about Kellam, but I knew he could fend for himself. I had caught sight of him during the battle, taking on much faster and lighter foes than himself. He was clearly more capable than his unassuming exterior suggested.

Frederick and I approached the stairway that led up to the door, with Vaike and Lissa in tow.

“Can this horse make it up these steps?” I asked, hoping I hadn’t miscalculated.

“Of course,” he said, and I detected a note of pride in his voice. “For a mare of Torva’s calibre, these stairs are but a minor nuisance.”

I was glad he was so confident. It made my doubts begin to recede. I chided myself. *I shouldn’t be having doubts, anyway.*

The door itself posed another problem. It was made of solid iron, and had only been toughened by the harsh weather conditions of Regna Ferox.

“Step aside!” exclaimed a boisterous voice from behind. “This puny door is no match for the

Vaike!”

Whether that statement was true or not, I’ll never know, for Frederick pulled on the reins, causing Torva to turn and give the door a firm kick with her hind legs. The door groaned in protest, giving way beneath the strength of the horse.

“No challenge at all,” Frederick muttered. I heard Vaike grumbling as we stepped over the remains of the door and passed through to the fortress roof.

On the far side of the roof, there was a loud noise as the door on that side was blasted off its hinges by a Fire spell. I looked over to see Miriel walking calmly over the debris, with Sully and Stahl following on their horses. Virion wouldn’t be far behind, but in between us and the other Shepherds was a group of dangerous-looking Feroxi guards, one of whom was a large, armoured woman that I was certain had been the voice that had dismissed us at the gate. Also present were the spear-wielding guards that would have killed Chrom, had Sumia not intervened when she did.

This called for a change of tactics.

“Lissa,” I called to the girl, who currently stood next to the horse I was riding on.

“Yeah?”

“I want you to take my place here with Frederick. He’ll keep you safe.”

“I get to ride on Torva?!” she cried.

“Er, yes, you do.”

“Then what will *you* do?” she asked.

“I’m going to go with Vaike to see if we can take down those spear-throwing guards. Once we do, the skies will be clear for Chrom and Sumia to land.”

She gave me a quick nod, and I slid down off the horse’s back. Frederick helped her up to the saddle, where she sat behind the knight, just as I had.

Frederick looked uncomfortable with what he was about to say. “...Take care, Robin.”

“I will. Thank you, Frederick.”

He shook the reins and Torva cantered away into the battle.

“Come on, Vaike,” I said. “Let’s go and help Chrom.”

“Alright!” the blond man cried. “It’s Vaike time!”

Keeping close to the other man, we ran full pelt at the guards, who were gathered at the front of the roof, still looking skyward at the pegasus that soared above the battlefield. They couldn’t take their eyes off of Chrom and Sumia, for if they did, the pegasus would be free to attack them. This left their attentions completely focused on the pegasus, and unaware of the battle that was breaking out behind them.

Vaike, unfortunately, wasn’t much for stealth, and he let out a roar as we charged the guards, alerting them to our presence. About half of the guards turned, weapons drawn, to face us while the others kept their eyes to the skies.

“We were supposed to sneak up on them,” I muttered to Vaike.

“Hah!” He barked out a laugh. “The Vaike and his faithful sidekick can take these bozos no problem! Who needs stealth when you have an axe?”

And with that, he launched himself at one of the guards, effortlessly dodging the man’s spear and bringing the axe down on his helmet, which crumpled like paper and the guard collapsed into a heap on the ground.

Another guard ran at Vaike, but he smoothly dodged the attack and I launched a Thunder spell at the armoured man. When that one fell, I readied another spell, only for Vaike to collide with my target and swing his axe through the guard’s unprotected head. I chose another guard, who was approaching me warily with his weapon outstretched, and I muttered the incantation from my tome and cast the spell. The ball of lightning struck the guard’s chestplate, and he shuddered violently as the power of the spell coursed through him. By then, only a few of the guards were left.

“Nice!” Vaike exclaimed as the guard collapsed. “You make a good sidekick, Robin!”

But now, the other guards were focusing on us instead of Chrom and Sumia. One of them hefted a spear over his shoulder, and then raised it, ready to throw. I felt a jolt run through my body: I had seen these Feroxi warriors in action, and I knew that from this distance, there was no way the spear would miss its mark. If that guard threw his spear, I would most likely die.

I flinched, bracing myself for the final blow, but it never came. Instead, there was a loud sound of tearing metal, and a shriek. I opened my eyes to see the Feroxi guard collapsing to the ground, with Kellam pulling his spear out of the man’s back.

Kellam smiled warmly. “I’m so glad I finally caught up to you! You all ran off without me.”

I was stunned, and I noticed that all of the spear-throwing guards had been disabled. Kellam had saved my life.

“I...thank you, Kellam,” I muttered thickly.

I was interrupted by a howl of fury behind us. We all turned to see Frederick engaged in combat with the female guard. The woman was a powerful fighter, as seemed to be Feroxi tradition, but her vicious swings of the lance never came close to Frederick, whose horse practically danced over the guard’s weapon and he countered with quick strikes from his own lance. I saw Lissa standing nearby, ready to heal if necessary. Sully and Stahl were still sticking together, I noticed, and were watching the battle unfold with interest.

Despite clearly being on the losing side of the battle, the Feroxi woman laughed brazenly. “Where is your ‘prince’ now?” she snarled at Frederick.

The knight smiled most uncharacteristically. “Look to the skies, my lady.”

I saw her eyes move past us and upwards, widening just as a shadow passed over our group once again. The pegasus whinnied loudly as it descended, shooting like an arrow towards the guard. At the last possible second before collision, Sumia pulled hard on the reins and the pegasus swooped upwards. Chrom took this moment to leap from the pegasus’ back and fall towards the Feroxi guard, Falchion raised and roaring in triumph. The Feroxi woman lifted her lance above her head to meet the holy sword, but her weapon was cleaved cleanly in half by the blow. She staggered and fell backwards, stunned as Chrom landed almost gracefully in front of her. Before the woman could make another move, Chrom swung Falchion, stopping with the blade only inches from her

neck.

“Yield,” he ordered, his voice tinged with steel.

The guard gave a shaky nod, and the prince stepped back to let her rise. She stood up straight, only to then bow down low.

“A thousand apologies, Prince Chrom,” she muttered humbly, “I truly mistook you for brigand impostors. But no frauds could ever wage a battle as you just have! I will send word of your arrival to the capital and escort you there, personally.”

Chrom was taken aback by the change in the woman’s demeanour, but he gave a quick nod and said, “That would be most appreciated. Thank you.”

“But, Chrom, what about these wounded men?” Lissa gestured to the Feroxi guards, completely incapacitated by the Shepherds’ assault. I winced: not all of them were merely wounded...

“I assure you that they will all be cared for,” the Feroxi woman said. “And the dead will be buried.”

Lissa looked forlorn at the woman’s words.

“Do not grieve for them,” the guard told her. “These were Feroxi soldiers, prepared to give their lives for their cause. Their deaths were my responsibility.”

“I...I understand,” Lissa said finally. “Thank you.”

The woman gave a curt nod, then turned on her heel and marched through a door behind her, into the Longfort.

Immediately, the Shepherds began conversing amongst themselves. I moved over to Chrom, preparing to congratulate him on a job well done, I was surprised when he grabbed me by the shoulders and asked, “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head, and he relaxed. “I was watching from above and I must say, Robin, you really know your way around a battlefield. I’m glad I brought you along with us.” He grinned. “You saved our necks out here!”

“Indeed.” I felt Frederick’s cool glare on the back of my neck. “Are you certain that you’ve never fought before?”

It was only natural for Frederick’s distrust of me to return once the battle had ended. I was saved from having to reply by Vaike who appeared suddenly and clapped me on the back.

“Lay off him, Frederick. This kid’s got some serious stones!”

“You were amazing, Robin!” Lissa smiled at me. “You’re like a master tactician!”

I looked down at my feet. “A master tactician wouldn’t have let those Feroxi men die.”

My vision was filled with Chrom’s feet as he stood in front of me. “Don’t talk like that. They attacked us after we attempted diplomacy. In simpler terms, it was either us or them. You did the right thing.”

I met his gaze. “Thank you.”

He smiled. “What are friends for?” He cast a quick glance around him, before muttering to me,

“Did you see the way that Feroxi woman acted once we had beaten her?”

I nodded. “It was amazing. Her whole demeanour changed.”

Frederick overheard our little discussion and said, “In Regna Ferox, strength speaks louder than words. I should have known better than to overestimate the value of diplomacy here.”

“You did well, Frederick,” Chrom told him. “Don’t let it bother you.”

I heard Lissa shivering from next to me. “Can we get going now, Chrom?”

The adrenaline of battle was fading, and I, too, was feeling the chill.

“Well, it’s not getting any warmer.” Chrom concurred with my thoughts. We followed him through the door the female guard had passed through a minute before.

We were escorted down through the Longfort by a series of silent Feroxi guards. We were led all the way to a pair of large, brass doors, that I was certain was the fortress exit. A messenger with dark hair and tanned skin stood in front of the doors, and he bowed slightly when Chrom approached.

“Prince Chrom of Ylisse,” he said in greeting. “Raimi told me of your arrival, and of your desire to see the khan.” Seeing our confused looks, he explained, “Raimi is the commander of this fortress. She’s the woman you pummelled, up on the roof.” A smirk passed over his mouth briefly, before his professional façade resumed. “She has passed word, and her personal guard will be escorting you to the capital, along with the commander herself.”

“Where is Raimi now?” Chrom asked.

“She has travelled to the nearest village to secure lodgings for you, seeing as how a group of your size couldn’t possibly stay here, in the Longfort.” Again, the smirk appeared and disappeared. “You are to join her. The village is only a few miles down the road. You will embark on your journey to the capital at dawn. Sire,” he added.

“Understood,” Chrom said, “We are grateful for your hospitality.”

The messenger turned and knocked out a quick rhythm on the door, obviously some kind of signal. The great doors opened up to the swirling snow outside.

The messenger stepped aside to let us pass, the smirk returning in full force this time. “Safe journey,” he called as we walked out of the Longfort.

As we walked through the rapidly-building snow that now covered the road north, I discussed the day’s events with Chrom.

“I never imagined that life with the Shepherds would be so...”

He raised an eyebrow. “Busy?”

I shrugged. “I was going to say ‘hectic’. ‘Busy’, I can handle. I was prepared for ‘busy’.”

He chortled, but his face quickly grew solemn. “You joined us at a bad time. With tensions rising

between Ylisse and Plegia, the Shepherds are needed now more than ever to keep the peace.”

“So it’s not always like this?”

“Not really, no. But ever since the Mad King started sending hordes of brigands into Ylisse at a time, well...” He lowered his voice. “I’m worried about the others. I mean, you’ve only been with us for a few days and you’re already starting to tire. *They’ve* been at this since...well, a long time. They’re all such hard workers, but they have their limits.”

“Even Frederick?”

Chrom smiled despite himself. “Even Frederick. I presume. I just don’t want everyone to be at their weakest when we need them the most.”

“That’s why we’re here now, Chrom,” I say. “You’ve seen the Feroxi in battle; with them on our side, those Plegians won’t stand a chance.”

“I hope you’re right, Robin. I really do.”

We trudged on through the snow in silence. I thought about Chrom’s words, and my own. ‘Those Plegians’, I had said. As though I was separate from them.

And why shouldn’t I be? I thought, I grew up in Ylisse. I hardly even remember Plegia.

“Oh, really?” An insidious voice reverberated in the back of my head. *“Then why the hesitation? Why not simply tell Chrom and the others that you’re Plegian?”*

I couldn’t do that. I had just gotten these people to accept me. I couldn’t throw that all away now.

“Is this how friends treat one another? With lies and obfuscation of the truth? Are you really so different from ‘those Plegians’.”

This strange voice in my head began to disturb me. I shut it out, and decided to focus instead on the ever-falling snow. I shivered.

Chapter 7

We spent the night in a rather cold and desolate Feroxi village. We had met with Raimi, the woman who had accused us of being imposters only the day before, at a run-down inn. The owner was apparently used to having large groups staying at a time, seeing as the village was located right next to the road. The Feroxi covered the expenses for the overnight stay.

“I reckon that makes up for them trying to kill us,” Sully had commented.

Despite the basic conditions of the inn, I slept like a log. I hoped I wouldn’t have to fight this much *every* day. Otherwise, Chrom might have had a point about tiring ourselves out.

The morning arrived quickly, and we were awoken by a gruff Feroxi soldier, who had also woken Frederick up, much to the knight’s displeasure. I’m sure he wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of a wake-up call.

Within a very short space of time, we were all awake and ready to march. Well, maybe *awake* isn’t quite the correct word. I remember Lissa being carried out of the inn in Frederick’s arms, sound asleep, and not waking up until we were a few miles away from the village. She was very irritable that particular morning.

“I know something that will cheer you up, Lissa.” Chrom pointed behind us, back towards the village, to where the sky was slowly growing brighter. The snowstorm had long since ceased, and the clouds had parted to reveal the golden-yellow of the rising sun.

But not even the sunrise could cheer up the princess. “Seen it,” she mumbled, to the general amusement of the Shepherds and even some of the stone-faced Feroxi soldiers.

The rays of the rising sun illuminated the landscape, allowing us to see the capital of Regna Ferox jutting up from the horizon.

“The city is built around a coliseum,” Frederick explained on behalf of Raimi, who didn’t seem much for words. “The coliseum itself contains an arena of great size. Located at the foot of the coliseum is the seat of power: Castle Ferox. I wager it is there we will meet with the khan.”

“How do you know so much about Regna Ferox, Frederick?” I asked.

“It is part of my duty as a knight to be aware of the culture of the lands bordering our nation,” he said primly.

“Oh, is that why I saw you reading a travel guide back home in Ylisstol?”

Frederick scowled at Lissa’s words, and both Chrom and I burst out laughing.

It was mid-morning when we finally arrived in the capital. Although not quite as large or as densely-populated as Ylisstol, the Feroxi capital had a certain kind of charm to it. My first impression of the people of Ferox had been given by the soldiers at the Longfort: gruff, stern and capable warriors. But the common people seemed not entirely different from the Ylisseans. True, most of them had tanned or dark-coloured skin, and wore furs as opposed to the cloth or silks favoured in Ylisse. But instead of a sea of foreign, unsmiling faces, we were greeted by ordinary townsfolk: merchants, children playing in streets and blacksmiths going about their daily business. Granted, we did pass several barracks, filled with soldiers who were clearly preparing for war. But these events were just a part of everyday life in Regna Ferox.

“Do you see those soldiers, Robin?” Chrom muttered to me. “And the blacksmiths? If only Ylisse could be this driven...”

Just as the castle had dominated the skyline of Ylisstol, the great coliseum loomed over the city, casting its cold shadow over the already-frozen city. As we walked through the streets, I noticed that nearly every roadway seemed to lead directly towards the coliseum. The closer we got to the arena, it became clearer that all of the city’s streets radiated outwards from the coliseum in the centre. I couldn’t help but be amazed by the structuring of the city: it was a marvel of architectural planning.

At the base of the coliseum was another grand building, one that would have been considered large in any other city, but here it was dwarfed by the majesty of the arena behind it. This was Castle Ferox, home to the khan.

Myself, Chrom, Frederick and Lissa were lead up the great stone steps into the castle by Raimi, while her soldiers escorted the remainder of the Shepherd to a waiting area elsewhere inside the castle.

As we marched up the steps, I asked Chrom, “Shouldn’t I be staying with the others?”

Chrom smiled wryly. “You’re not getting away that easily, Robin. I think our new tactician has a right to negotiate the terms of our alliance with Ferox.”

I was honoured. “You’d make me your tactician after only being an official Shepherd for a day?”

Chrom scoffed. “You know I hate all that ‘official’ business. And besides, you’ve proven yourself capable of making the kinds of decisions necessary to be a tactician. You’re the perfect man for the job.”

Do I really deserve this praise?

“I only did what anyone would have done.”

Chrom laughed. “I doubt that ‘anyone’ would have had the balls to order a group of highly-trained soldiers around a battlefield the way you did.”

I grinned, enjoying the feeling of pride his words gave me, while Frederick reprimanded Chrom for his choice of language.

“It won’t happen again,” the prince promised, giving me a wink when he was sure the knight wasn’t looking.

We followed Raimi through a series of large, open rooms before we reached what I knew to be the audience chamber. It was slightly smaller than the one in Ylisstol, but I was quick to spot two thrones on a raised dais. The audience chamber in the Ylissean palace only had one: for the exalt herself. Why would the khan need two?

Raimi told us to wait at the foot of the dais as she summoned the khan, then left through a doorway off to the left. I was confused – did this mean the khan was away? I voiced my concerns to Chrom.

“Off training, I’d wager,” he said. “The khans of Ferox prefer battle to politics. Or rather, battle *is* their politics,” he added.

“A warrior ruler, eh?” I suppressed a grin as a humorous image popped into my head. “I can picture him now: a giant of a man with arms like tree-trunks, his broad chest covered in hair...”

A sharp voice pierced through my daydreaming. “Am I now?”

We turned to face the door Raimi had left through, seeing a tall woman with tanned skin, dressed in red and silver armour, striding towards us with a look of obvious amusement. She seemed to project an aura of strength, even in the way she walked, with a hint of nobility in her strong features. This woman was clearly the khan herself.

“Oh, please,” she called out to us – to *me*, “do go on! I want to hear how this one ends.”

I felt my face flushing red, and I tried to shrink back into my cloak. I could hear Lissa desperately trying to stifle her giggles.

We’ve only just met the khan, and I’ve already made an ass of myself. I knew I should’ve gone with the others...

Chrom was surprised, too. “You’re the-” He collected himself quickly, under the watchful eyes of Frederick. “That is to say...the khan, I presume?”

“One of them, yes: the East-Khan. My name is Flavia. I apologize for the troubles at the border, Prince Chrom. You are welcome in Regna Ferox.”

One of them...?

“Thank you,” said Chrom, “but I’m confident we can put that misunderstanding behind us. Is it that true bandits posing as Ylisseans have been ransacking your border villages?”

Flavia gritted her teeth angrily. “Yes, those Plegian dogs! We found documents proving as much on the corpse of one of their captains. Plegia must see some benefit in raising tensions between your nation and ours.”

Chrom’s temper flared at the khan’s words. “Damn them!” He immediately looked ashamed at having misspoken, and he bowed to the khan. “I... forgive me, Your Grace. That was indelicately put.” I could see Frederick glaring daggers at Chrom.

But Flavia simply laughed. “Damn them and damn delicacy! Here in Ferox, we appreciate plain speech.”

“In that case, you should have a word with your damn border guards,” Chrom grumbled.

The khan barked out another laugh, this one loud and unrefined. “Now *that’s* Feroxi diplomacy! Yes, I like you already, Prince Chrom.”

Chrom chuckled along as well, and I could see he was at ease in this woman’s presence. I felt myself relax a bit, as well, although I was still mortified from my earlier slip-up. Frederick, on the other hand, was looking thoroughly unimpressed by the antics of both his liege and the khan.

“Now then,” Flavia declared. “To business. I know why you have come, Prince. But unfortunately, I cannot provide any Feroxi troops for Ylissee.”

Chrom was clearly dismayed, as were the rest of us.

“Why not?” Lissa cried.

“I lack the authority,” Flavia replied.

Suddenly, the presence of the twin thrones became clear to me. But Chrom was still putting the

pieces together. "Forgive me, but I don't understand. Aren't you the khan?"

"As I said, I am *one* of the khans." Flavia tutted impatiently. "In Ferox, the khans of east and west hold a tournament every few years. The victor acquires total sovereignty over both kingdoms and becomes Khan-Regnant, which means they have the final say when it comes to forging alliances. The West-Khan won the last tournament, you see, and so..." She left the sentence hanging, but her meaning was clear.

Chrom sighed heavily. "So we are to receive no aid at all?"

Flavia raised her eyebrows. "Not if you always give up so easily! The next tournament is nigh, you see, and I am in need of champions."

"What does that have to do with us?" Chrom asked.

"The captain of my border guard informs me that you Shepherds are quite capable. Perhaps you would consider representing the East in the upcoming tournament? If you win and I become ruling khan, I will grant your alliance."

This was good news, but Chrom still had concerns. "I would have assumed Ylisseans had no place in such Feroxi traditions."

"On the contrary," said Flavia. "You see, the khans themselves do not fight; they choose champions to represent them. Otherwise our land would be full of dead khans, not to mention vicious blood feuds! We don't involve comrades or kin for the same reason. Eventually, it was decided the tournament should be fought by outsiders. Although the outsiders have never included foreign royalty...that I know of!" She laughed again. "Regardless, it is your choice to make."

Chrom was firm. "There *is* no choice, East-Khan. My people are desperate. We face constant attacks from Plegia that push the halidom to the brink of war. If fighting for you is the quickest way to an alliance, then we will gladly take up our steel."

Flavia grinned broadly. "Oh, I *like* you, Prince Chrom. I do hope you survive the tournament! Be wary: an equally-able swordsman champions the West-Khan. He defeated my own champion in the previous tournament without even breaking a sweat!"

"When does the tournament begin, may I ask?"

"Tomorrow," the East-Khan replied. "You and your Shepherds will be accommodated here, in the castle. They will serve as your allies in the tournament."

"Thank you," Chrom said. "We owe you our gratitude."

Flavia laughed once again. "If you owe me *that* much, prove it by taking out the West-Khan's dog tomorrow!"

We stayed overnight in Castle Ferox, which had more than enough room to accommodate the Shepherds. I wondered, during our stay, where the West-Khan's champions were located. Were they staying inside the castle, as well? Had they even arrived yet? It would be of great tactical benefit to survey our opponents before the battle the next day. But I didn't even catch a glimpse of them until we entered the arena.

Arena Ferox was supposedly the largest of its kind in the world. There were similarly-styled coliseums dotted all over Ferox, apparently created with the intent of solving local or regional disputes. But none could surpass the arena in terms of both size and import. Conflicts on a national scale were resolved in this building, most notably the issue of East versus West and which side reigns over the other. After doing some research on Feroxi politics, I learned that Arena Ferox was the place where a khan received and dealt with challenges to his or her throne. Anyone could fight for the position of khan, with the idea being that the khan is the most powerful warrior in the eastern or western half of the kingdom. However, khans could only receive one challenge a month, and so there was a lengthy waiting list.

The importance of the great building struck me hard as we walked up the stone steps that lead into the coliseum. This place was the centre of Feroxi society, an integral part of their culture. And we were marching right into it. No matter what Flavia said, it didn't feel quite right.

Chrom saw my expression. "Don't be nervous, Robin. You're a capable fighter. Whoever the West-Khan's champion is, you can leave him to me."

"But what if we fail, Chrom? This battle ahead of us could determine the fate of the halidom."

The prince gritted his teeth. "You're right, of course. But I need you and the others to back me up. We can't afford to have doubts now."

His words comforted me, and I felt more relaxed as the entrance to the coliseum swallowed us up.

We were lead down a path that took us deeper into the coliseum, bypassing the routes that lead to the seating areas. The tension was palpable as we descended further into the coliseum. The path led to a small room, where we were told to wait. The tournament hadn't started yet, and the coliseum gates were about to be opened up to the general public. We needed to prepare for the upcoming battle.

"Any ideas, Robin?" Chrom asked me.

I didn't know enough about the tournament to make any sort of tactical decision yet. But, fortunately, I was saved from replying by the entrance of Flavia.

"Now, then!" she cried as she burst through the door. "Are my champions all set and ready to go?"

"Not quite, East-Khan," Chrom said. "We still don't know much about the rules of the tournament."

"Oh, of course. I should have explained earlier. My mistake." She sat down and made herself comfortable. "Now, the prince himself will be duelling with the West-Khan's mutt. But the rest of your companions will be doing battle against his lackeys. Have you decided who you will bring with you into the arena?"

"No, I'm afraid we haven't."

"Well, then you had better hurry on with it!" Flavia looked rather amused. "You can take up to five warriors into the arena with you," she added.

"Frederick, Lissa and Robin," Chrom said without hesitating.

"That makes only three. Is there anyone else?"

"Well, Robin?" Chrom turned to me. "Is there anyone who would be ideal for this task?"

I folded my arms and thought, looking at the gathered Shepherds one-by-one, eliminating the possibilities. Seeing how well they had worked together at the Longfort, I wanted to bring Sumia into the arena to assist Chrom. But the rules stated that the champions must duel one another alone. Chrom and Sumia wouldn't be able to pair up against the West-Khan's champion. But that didn't rule out the possibility of others pairing up.

Sully and Stahl had been simply fantastic when they had fought together the day before. Each was so familiar with the other's style and flaws that they complemented each other perfectly. If Chrom couldn't pair up with Sumia, then the two cavaliers were the ideal choice to take into the arena.

I spoke their names aloud, and Chrom nodded. Sully grinned proudly and punched Stahl hard in the shoulder. Stahl, although grimacing in pain, also looked pleased at having been chosen.

"We won't let you down," they promised.

"Then it's settled!" Flavia exclaimed. "The tournament is set to begin in less than an hour. I *do* hope you will win!"

As we walked out onto the arena floor, the shouts and cheers of the crowd were deafening. As they were not participating in the tournament, the other Shepherds were allowed to join the crowds in the stands. I thought I could hear Vaike shouting himself hoarse as we marched out.

Sumia and Chrom had, of course, shared a tender moment before leaving the waiting room. When she thought no one was looking, Sumia gave Chrom a brief embrace, much to the prince's surprise. As she pulled away, blushing furiously, she mumbled, "Good luck, Captain," and practically sprinted out the door to join the other Shepherds in the stands. Chrom's face had also turned bright red. I pretended I hadn't noticed.

On the opposite side of the arena, some distance away, we saw our opponents for the first time. Most of them were Feroxi soldiers, similar to the ones we had encountered at the Longfort. But there was one man who did not wear the Feroxi uniform, and dressed instead in furs and a flowing robe that trailed out behind him as he walked. The man's strange uniform, coupled with the unusual design of the sword that he drew as he entered the arena, clued me in to his status as a warrior.

"Is that the West-Khan's champion?" Lissa asked.

"That's him, alright." Chrom narrowed his eyes and said to me, "Do you see his weapon?"

"Yes," I said. "That's the sword of a myrmidon."

Myrmidons were highly-skilled warriors, gifted in the ways of the sword. They were famed for their speed and precision in battle, sacrificing defensive capabilities for agility and strength. Some myrmidons grew to such heights as to be called 'swordmasters,' and their prowess with the blade was considered to be unparalleled.

"I never thought I'd ever see one," Chrom muttered. "Let alone do battle against them."

"Ooh," Lissa giggled, "he's a *hunk*!"

I raised my eyebrows, following Lissa's gaze to the West-Khan's champion. He was tall, well-

built and had thick, brown hair. His eyes were narrowed and his rugged face was set in a deep frown, in a manner that reminded me of Frederick.

“He’s certainly...*exotic*,” I muttered.

“Milady, I would ask you to focus on the task at hand,” Frederick said.

“I know, I know,” Lissa grumbled.

“Any thoughts, Robin?” Chrom asked.

I nodded. “The arena is shaped like a circle, and the West-Khan’s men are spreading out to cover the perimeter and the centre. We could form a three-pronged attack, with Chrom duelling with the champion in the middle, while the rest of us try to approach them from the side.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Chrom said. “Give your orders, then.”

The responsibility weighed on me, but I said, “Sully and Stahl, pair up like you did yesterday. You can take the left side of the arena.”

“Can do, Robin,” Sully said, as she mounted her horse.

“We’ll do our best,” Stahl promised.

“Lissa,” I said, “from what I can see, the other side has no healer, which makes you our biggest advantage over them.”

The princess’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Really. Frederick is capable of taking out our opponents while also protecting you, as he proved so well yesterday. So I want you to stay with him. You’ll join me and we’ll take the right side of the arena.”

Lissa nodded, and Frederick helped her up. I gave them one last piece of advice, “If you see anyone getting injured, I want you to prioritise their health over your opponent. That *includes* Chrom. Frederick, you’ll need to ferry Lissa over to the wounded quickly in order for her to get to work.”

“Understood,” Frederick said.

“You really are something, Robin,” Chrom muttered to me, before yelling, “Alright, let’s move out!”

We took up our positions as the crowd roared in the stands. The bell rang out, signalling the start of the tournament. With an answering roar, we charged at our opponents. We divided up, just as I had planned, into three groups. The side I had taken, along with Frederick and Lissa, contained several heavily-armoured soldiers, who would be vulnerable to my magic and to Frederick’s brute strength. The smaller foes, with lighter armour, were being tackled by the cavalier pair. That just left Chrom and the myrmidon in the centre.

One of the Feroxi soldiers confronted me, and so I pulled out my Thunder tome once again to do battle. I waited for him to strike with his lance, and I pulled away at the last second, leaving him wide open. I quickly chanted the incantation, but to my surprise, the armoured soldier had recovered before I could finish, and he struck again. The point of his spear hit me in the gut and I cried out, unable to focus my thoughts enough to concentrate my magic. The Thunder spell fizzled away, leaving me completely exposed and defenceless. Just as it seemed I was about to be hit

again, Frederick appeared out of the corner of my vision and swung his lance hard at the Feroxi soldier, who crumpled to the arena floor.

“Be careful!” the knight snapped, as Lissa pointed her staff towards me. Almost instantly, I felt a warm feeling rise up from my stomach, where the soldier had pierced me. I gave my belly a quick rub, feeling no wound and no pain.

“Thank you!” I called to them as they rode on. That had been a very close call. It was clear to me now that these Feroxi soldiers were much more competent and dangerous than the ones we had encountered at the Longfort. Which made sense, I supposed. After all, these men were chosen to fight in this tournament by the West-Khan himself. *Or herself*, I thought, fearing a repeat of yesterday’s embarrassment.

I took the time to see how Chrom was faring against the myrmidon. From what I could gauge, the two men were evenly matched in terms of skill. The other man was faster, but Chrom was stronger. I watched as they weaved around each other, blades swinging wildly as they fought. I had seen Chrom in battle before, but no opponent had ever lasted long. The myrmidon was holding his own, and even fighting back. In fact, often times it was Chrom who was on the defensive. I knew that focusing on quick, offensive strikes was an integral part of a myrmidon’s fighting style. This battle would hinge on whether or not Chrom could stay strong in the face of this mighty foe.

The crowd was just as mesmerised by the duel as I was. After all, tournaments of this scale and import only took place once every couple of years or so. The entertainment aspect of the tournament was just as vital as the political side.

On the far side of the arena, I saw Sully and Stahl bringing down one of the Feroxi soldiers, before moving on to another. Pairing those two up had proven to be a stroke of genius. I would need to find other pairings among the Shepherds that were as viable as theirs.

“Focus, Robin!” I heard Frederick shout as he rode past again. His words had a strong effect on me, and I chided myself for getting distracted in battle. *Chrom would never let that happen to himself.*

By now, there were only a few of our opponents left standing, the others having been incapacitated, but not killed. According to Flavia, any deaths in the arena resulted in a disqualification for the killer’s team, and the khan whose champion had died became Khan-Regnant by default. Who said the Feroxi were all barbarians?

Another armoured man approached, and this time, I was ready with a Thunder spell. I made sure to weaken the blast so as to not accidentally kill the soldier. The bolt of lightning struck the Feroxi soldier on the leg, and he went down, shuddering as the energy coursed through his body.

Within a few more minutes, the West-Khan’s men had all been taken out, except for the myrmidon. The rules of the tournament were clear: only the champion from one side could defeat the other champion. Once the champion of one side went down, the victory went to the other side, no matter how many of their allies had been beaten. I imagined that this particular set of rules was implemented for entertainment rather than practicality or equality.

Both swordsmen struggled on in the centre of the arena, sweat dripping from their bodies as they began to tire. The duel would not last much longer. But the victor was yet to be decided.

The two jumped back, away from each other, preparing to charge once again. As Chrom stepped back, I noticed he was favouring his left leg, leaning heavily on it. I knew for a fact that Chrom’s right leg was the dominant one, from having studied him in battle. Why the sudden change?

Lissa noticed it, too, from where she sat on Frederick's horse nearby. "He's wounded," she whispered.

She slid off the horse's back and ran over to her brother, despite Frederick's protests. She arrived just as the two men began to do battle once more.

"Chrom!" she cried. "Let me heal you!"

Just then, something very strange happened. The myrmidon seemed to flinch, and took a quick swing at the prince. The swing was lazy, sloppy even, and Chrom easily parried the blow. The other man was stunned by the parry, and Chrom followed up with lightning speed, knocking the myrmidon's sword from his hand and pointing Falchion towards the man's throat.

The entire arena fell silent, punctuated only by the two, bitter words of the disarmed man: "I yield."

The crowd erupted into applause, with even the side representing Western Ferox giving a grudging cheer. Chrom nodded, and sheathed Falchion, offering his hand to his opponent. The dark-haired man looked shaken, in contrast with his stoic performance in battle, but he took the prince's hand, and gripped it firmly. Then, with one final, almost worried glance at Lissa, who stood behind her brother, the myrmidon turned and walked back towards the arena exit, where he stood silently, as though waiting for something, or someone.

We all ran forth to congratulate our leader, and even the other Shepherds in the crowd had hopped over the arena walls and sprinted over. Flavia was with them, and she wrapped the prince in a tight bear-hug until he gasped for air. The new Khan-Regnant laughed loudly as she let him go.

"Well fought!" she cried. "You have my respect, Prince of Ylisse. And, perhaps more to the point, you have your alliance. I will provide the halidom with the soldiers it needs."

"You have our thanks, East-Khan," Chrom said, smiling broadly as he rubbed his aching ribs.

"I should thank *you*!" she exclaimed. "It feels like ages since I've held full power. Come, my new friends! Tonight, we celebrate! I must make preparations..." She ran off with the energy of a woman half her age.

Our words of excitement at Chrom's victory were interrupted once again, this time by the sudden appearance of a tall and broad man, with dark skin and a deep, rumbling voice. He was dressed in bright, regal clothing that exposed his chest, which was criss-crossed with scars from long-ago battle wounds.

"Bah!" he grumbled. "Any excuse for a party and Flavia jumps on it!"

Chrom and the rest of us were taken by surprise by this man's arrival.

"I'm sorry," Chrom said, "have we met?"

"I'm the West-Khan you so rudely removed from power! The name's Basilio." He folded his arms as he stared down the prince. "You're handy with a sword, boy. I thought for sure I'd picked the stronger man. He's never failed me before. Looks like my little bird was right about you."

'Little bird'? Has he been spying on us?

"Who was that man?" Chrom asked.

"Lon'qu is his name. And a damn fine soldier he is, too. Not much for talking, mind you, but he's

practically peerless with a sword, as I'm sure you're aware." He glanced around the arena, spotting his champion still lingering near the entrance. "Lon'qu!" he bellowed. "Get your arse over here and meet your new companions!"

"Companions?" Chrom echoed, as the dark-haired man trudged over to our group.

"That's right!" the West-Khan boomed as he extended a massive arm around Lon'qu's shoulder. "Consider this fellow Western Ferox's contribution to the Ylislean cause. The best man for the job! Perhaps he even has the makings of a khan..."

Lissa moved first, walking over to Lon'qu and offering her hand, just as Chrom had done. "Nice to meet you!"

The dark-haired man recoiled violently. "Away, woman!" he cried.

Lissa looked downright heartbroken. "Wh-What did I say?!"

Basilio roared with laughter, slapping his knees in mirth. "Oh, that's rich! Never gets old. Don't worry, little lady, it's not your fault. Let's just say that ladies tend to put Lon'qu on edge."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Vaike and Sully share a knowing wink. I wasn't sure what the connotations behind it were.

"That explains why he reacted so violently when Lissa came near, during the duel," I said

Chrom grunted in surprise. "So...the reason I won the duel was..."

Lissa clapped her hands to her face. "Oh, no! I'm so sorry, Lon'qu!" She tried to express her apologies, but the dark-haired man kept edging further away from her.

"I lost because of my own weakness," Lon'qu grumbled. "You were the stronger champion, and so the title of Khan-Regnant belongs to the East-Khan."

"If that's how you feel," Chrom said, "then so be it." His eyes narrowed. "But I still want a rematch."

I thought I saw a smile twist Lon'qu's mouth. "Another time, then."

Chrom nodded. "I'll be waiting."

Basilio laughed again. "I can just feel the sparks fly! This is some touching stuff going on here! Enough to move this old man's stony heart." He wiped an imaginary tear from his eye, to the amusement of the gathered Shepherds.

In typical fashion, Frederick brought an end to the fun. "Milord? Milady? If the celebrations are over, we'd best return home. The exalt will want the news of our new alliance immediately."

"Right as always, Frederick," Chrom said. But he caught my eye and made a face when he knew Frederick couldn't see.

"But, Frederick," Lissa began to protest, "what about Flavia? She's expecting us at the festivities tonight!"

"I'm sure the East-Khan will forgive her champions for being unable to attend. We have a long march back to Ylisstol ahead of us." The Shepherds, including myself, all groaned at Frederick's words.

Basilio roared another laugh. “What a bunch of stiff! You’ll fit right in, Lon’qu.” He gave the smaller man a strong punch in the shoulder. To the myrmidon’s credit, he did not flinch.

As we were walking out of the arena, I was discussing the details of the battle with Chrom. Something - or more accurately, *someone* - caught my eye as we passed through the entrance hall: a tanned young man with sharp features. He was dressed in a red tunic and leaning against a pillar. He was watching our party intently, and when he saw me staring back, he winked. Something stirred within me: I was certain I had seen this man before...

Chrom noticed my distracted state. “Everything alright, Robin?”

I turned to him and gave him a nod. “I’m fine, Chrom.”

But when I swivelled my head around to look at the man in red again, he was gone. And nobody mentioned having seen anyone there.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter features the first OC for this fic. Fear not - his presence in the story will be kept to a minimum.

As soon as we arrived back in Ylistol, Chrom went to inform the exalt of the events in Regna Ferox. The rest of us collapsed into our beds, exhausted from the long journey. Over the next week or so, most of us remained in the barracks, while others went out on excursions, mainly to deal with any bandits that were still lurking around the Ylislean countryside. Chrom went off gallivanting around the halidom, even coming back with a new face, ready to join the Shepherds.

“So tell me,” I said to Chrom, after he had returned from a particularly long journey, “what exactly happened on your trip south?”

Chrom grimaced. “We ran into some bandits on an island in the Southern Sea. They attacked a local village and hauled the local people off to their camp. This young man here managed to escape and find us.”

He gestured to a small, scrawny-looking boy, dressed in simple clothes, who had been standing behind him.

“The name’s Donny,” the boy said, before correcting himself. “Er, that is, Donnel.”

Chrom finished the story. “He took us to the brigands’ camp and helped us free the villagers. He’s a hero.”

“Aw, I didn’t do that much, Your Great Sirness.” The boy named Donnel shuffled from one foot to the other, embarrassed. “I ain’t never done no fightin’ before.”

“Regardless, you held your own against those brigands. You proved yourself to be perfectly capable, Donny.”

The boy grinned sheepishly.

I wasn’t entirely sure what Chrom was thinking. The boy was green, to say the least. He was clearly inexperienced - he had admitted as much himself. But then I realised that, only a week beforehand, I was in the same situation as Donnel. But Chrom saw my potential, and welcomed me into the Shepherds with open arms. Perhaps this boy was more than he seemed. Besides, the way things were going with Plegia at the time, the Shepherds needed all the help they could get.

But as bad as things were getting, the worst news was still to come.

It was a peaceful day in Ylistol. Well, as peaceful as the Shepherds barracks could ever get. The air was almost always filled with the sounds of raised voices (usually Sully’s), swords clashing together or even the loud whinnies of pegasi. It was quite difficult to get a quiet moment to sit down and read a good book, a sentiment that Virion and I shared. He and I had discovered a unique way to pass the time. The set of a board and wooden figurines that I had occasionally used to plan out strategies, without having to resort to ordering the other Shepherds around, was now

being used to play a game that was similar in many ways to chess.

“Alas and alack,” the archer sighed one afternoon as we played, “I fear that we have been cursed with an interesting life, Robin.”

I gave an agreeing chuckle, as I took one of his pegasus knights.

But it wasn't all bad. Truthfully, those days spent in the barracks were some of the best days of my life. Never before had I been surrounded by people who respected me, not only as a tactician, but as their friend. The atmosphere of camaraderie among the Shepherds was unparalleled. Which is why it was such a shock when the news came that one of our own had been kidnapped by the Plegians.

During a particularly intense game that I had been playing against Virion in the common area of the barracks, we were interrupted by the sudden appearance of Chrom and Lisa, who had been attending a council meeting at the palace. They burst through the doors of the barracks, out of breath, obviously having run all the way from the palace.

It was Chrom who recovered first. “The Plegians have attacked. They ransacked a village near the border, in Themis.”

There were cries of shock from the gathered Shepherds. I understood where they were coming from. Themis was a fertile and wealthy region of Ylisse, located close to the Plegian border. By attacking there, the Plegians were signalling their intent, as well as sabotaging one of the halidom's most economically-central regions.

“And that's not all,” Lissa gasped, “they kidnapped Maribelle!”

Of course. Chrom and some of the others had told me that Maribelle was Themisian nobility: the daughter of a famous duke with connections to the royal family. In kidnapping her, the Plegians had assured that the attention of Ylisse's most important people would be focused on them.

“It gets worse,” Chrom spat. “King Gangrel of Plegia claims Lady Maribelle invaded *his* damned country. He demands that we pay reparations.” He let out a wordless sound of fury, slamming his fist against a wall. “That bastard! The Mad King has been trying to provoke war with Ylisse at every step! He won't stop until he drags this whole continent to hell with him!”

I asked him, “What is the exalt doing about this?”

“You won't believe it, Robin. She's planning on going to the border and offering parley. With Gangrel himself!” Chrom's body was shaking with fury.

“Do you suspect a trap?” I asked.

“Of *course* it's a trap!” he snapped. “But Emmeryn doesn't want us marching off to war.” He looked at me, with his eyes blazing. “So I'm going with her.”

“So am I!” Lissa declared.

“You can count me in, too!” Sully stood up, banging her fist against the table she had been sitting at. “I'm not letting that Plegian freak get away with this!”

“I'm coming, too!” Stahl, who was sitting next to her, exclaimed.

“Yeah, same here! The Vaike wants a piece of the action!”

Similar shouts of encouragement and volunteering went up around the room. I joined in, naturally.

“I thank you, my friends,” Chrom said. “Together, maybe we can stop this madness before it leads to war.”

The negotiations were due to begin the next morning, and so we began preparations for our trip to Themis. As we were bustling around the barracks, I caught sight of a young boy talking with Chrom. I hadn’t been introduced to the boy before, but I had noticed him among the other Shepherds during the week since we had returned from Regna Ferox. He often trained with Miriel. His cheap robes and oversized hat identified him as a mage. Whatever he was discussing with Chrom, the prince didn’t seem happy about, and the boy was eventually dismissed. The mage had a displeased expression as he walked away, grumbling to himself.

I walked over to Chrom. “What was that all about? Who was that boy just now?”

“You mean Ricken? He’s our youngest Shepherd. He wants to come along on the mission, but I told him that wasn’t possible.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“He’s too young. Too inexperienced.”

“As opposed to who? Me? Donny?”

Chrom didn’t meet my eye, choosing instead to fill up a tankard of water from a faucet. “That’s different. You and Donny have both proven yourself capable on the battlefield. Ricken’s just a boy.”

“He’s a *mage*, Chrom. I’ve seen him practising magic. Do you know how difficult it is to do that? Just the fact alone that he can use magic proves he has patience and skill.”

Chrom scowled. “Patience and skill can only get you so far. He’s not coming. That’s my final word on the matter.”

I shrugged. “Alright. Fine,” I said, choosing to leave the subject alone. “What do you think will happen tomorrow?”

“Truthfully, I don’t know. Gangrel is infamous for being highly unpredictable. They don’t call him the ‘Mad King’ for nothing.”

“Can you tell me more about him?”

Chrom turned and looked at me as he spoke. “There’s not much to say, really. Most of the information doesn’t cross the border. From what I’ve heard, he was born into poverty. He claimed that he was a distant relative of the previous king of Plegia, who was killed near the end of the... crusades led by my father all those years ago. Whether that’s true or not, I don’t know. The first few years of Emmeryn’s rule as exalt were accompanied by a violent succession crisis in Plegia. The king, it seemed, had no legitimate heirs. His cousins, nephews and nieces, bastard sons and grandsons fought amongst each other for the blasted crown, and somehow Gangrel rose to the top, even though he had been born in the slums.”

“And he’s the one who’s been authorising these brigand attacks across Ylisse and Ferox?”

“Most likely,” Chrom said. “Although we have no way of proving that he’s connected.” He snarled. “That man makes me sick to my stomach! How can he do such things to innocent people?”

“We’ll stop him,” I told him. “Not even the Mad King of Plegia will be able to stand against the Shepherds.”

Chrom looked into my eyes. “I hope you’re right, Robin.”

We marched from Ylisstol in the late afternoon, planning to stop once night fell, and then continue once dawn broke. Fortunately, Themis was not far-removed from the capital, and neither was the border with Plegia. We arrived at the Plegian border in the early morning, less than two days after leaving Ylisstol and several hours before the arranged time. Stationed at the border, waiting for us, was an entire regiment of Ylissean soldiers. On one side of the road leading through the mountains was a large squadron of pegasus knights. On the other, there were mounted knights and cavaliers. Infantry soldiers were scarce.

I whistled in appreciation. “Quite a sight,” I said to Chrom.

Chrom’s expression was full of concern. “But who’s to say that Plegia doesn’t have an even larger army on the other side of those mountains, waiting to attack?”

I didn’t have an answer.

We were excused for the remainder of the time before parley began, and so many of the Shepherds started talking to friends or relatives from the collected army. I saw Sumia run over to a fellow pegasus knight, with long, red hair and a dignified face, only to trip over a small rock and collide with the ground face-first. Her red-haired friend helped her up. Chrom started over to help his friend, then shook his head and turned away. Sully and Stahl were right at home among the cavaliers, greeting old friends and colleagues with smiles, handshakes and, in Sully’s case, tackles. Frederick, on the other hand, stood stock-still and made no attempt to converse with his fellow knights.

I went over to him. “You’re not going to chat?”

“Fraternising is not part of my duty,” he replied.

“It’s not stopping Phila,” I noted, pointing to the pegasus knight, who was talking rather animatedly with Sumia and her friend.

“What the Air Marshal does with her time is her own concern.” The knight’s voice was stiff, and possibly even bitter. “My duty is to Prince Chrom and the exalt, today more than ever.”

“Alright,” I said, “it’s a sore subject. I understand.”

An uncomfortable silence fell between us, which was interrupted when a large knight in dark blue armour rode over to us. He pulled off his helmet, revealing a young man with a broad face and handsome features. He grinned as he dismounted from his horse.

I heard Frederick mutter something that sounded an awful lot like, “Oh, no.”

“I knew it was you, Fred!” the other knight exclaimed, gripping Frederick by the hand. “How’ve you been?”

“...Very well, thank you.”

“Ah, still as cheerful as ever, I see. A barrel of laughs, that’s you.” The knight’s eyes fell on me. “And who’s this?”

“My name is Robin, sir. I’m a Shepherd.”

“A Shepherd, eh? Well, you’re in good hands with Fred, here.” He gave Frederick’s shoulder a quick squeeze. “I suppose I should introduce myself, then? I’m Samuel, Brigadier-General of the Ylissean Knights.” He took my hand and shook it firmly. “And how are you finding being a Shepherd, Robin?”

“It’s...overwhelming, honestly.”

“Oh, really? I’m sure Frederick’s been driving you like a slave all the time.”

“Well, not *all* the time. We get breaks for meals, you see.”

The Brigadier-General laughed loudly. “You’re a sly one, Robin. I’m sure His Highness has his hands full dragging you *and* the princess around the place.”

I found myself liking this man. It helped that Frederick was clearly uncomfortable in his presence.

“Luckily, he only has to carry *one* of us,” I joked, and the knight laughed again.

“I’m glad to see that spending time with Frederick hasn’t killed your sense of humour. The man wouldn’t know something funny even if it punched him in the face.”

It was my turn to laugh, as Frederick’s expression grew darker by the second.

“Well,” Samuel said, “as entertaining as this has been, I had better be moving on. ‘Duty calls’, as they say.” He climbed back up onto his horse. “It was great seeing you again, Fred.” He nodded at me, before riding off again.

I stifled a giggle at seeing Frederick’s glowering face.

“‘*Fred*’?” I muttered.

He twitched.

“Is he a friend of yours?” I asked.

“...I suppose,” the knight grumbled.

“You don’t seem to like him much,” I pointed out.

“I don’t wish to continue talking about this matter. If you’ll excuse me.” He turned and walked away, leading his horse behind him.

I chuckled, deciding to go over and join the other Shepherds. *Who knows*, I thought, *maybe I’ll make some more new friends?*

But as I passed a large boulder at the foot of one of the mountain peaks, I heard someone whisper my name.

“Robin.”

I whirled around. “Hello?” I called. “Is someone there?”

“Over here,” the voice whispered.

The voice was coming from the other side of the boulder. I took a quick glance around, before sneaking around to the other side.

There, leaning against the edge of the large boulder, was a soldier dressed in blue and white armour: the colours of Ylisse. His helmet had a visor that was pulled down over his face. Only his mouth was visible.

“Is there some reason why you’ve called me out here?” I asked.

“Do you want to save the girl?”

“‘Girl’? You mean Maribelle?”

“That’s right. The Plegians have her locked up tight. Do you want to save her?”

“O-of course,” I said, confused by the words of this soldier. Why was he doing this?

“How do you plan to do that?” he asked.

“I...hadn’t really thought about it,” I confessed. “After all, we have no information on where or how the Plegians are keeping her.”

“...So this is the brilliant tactician I’ve heard so much about?”

“Excuse me?” I bristled, stung by the soldier’s words.

“You know these Plegians can’t be trusted. They’ll kill her without even a second thought if things aren’t going their way. And believe me; things will *not* go their way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You *do* know you’re being watched, right?” The soldier pointed up to one of the mountain peaks. “The Plegians have been spying on this valley ever since the Ylisseans arrived. They’ll be aware of your every move, before you even begin.”

“...Then what do we do?” I felt helpless. There were so many aspects of this parley that I hadn’t considered.

“Well, there are only two people in this valley right now who aren’t being watched. In other words, two people who aren’t supposed to be here.” He raised a hand. “One of them is yours truly. It’s up to you to find the other one.”

“...You’re not an Ylissean soldier,” I realised. “Who are you?”

“Think of me as...an ambassador.” His lips twisted in a smirk, which gave me a jolt of familiarity.

“Have I met you before?” I asked him.

But, just then, I heard Chrom’s voice calling me. “Robin?”

“I believe that’s your cue,” the ‘ambassador’ said. “You know what you have to do now. Be prepared for the worst. And don’t die,” he advised. “It’s much less fun that way.”

I was reluctant to leave this stranger, but Chrom’s voice grew closer, and so I turned from the man and walked around to the front of the boulder again. I bumped into the prince as I stepped back onto the path.

“Where have you been?” he asked, looking worried.

I gestured to the large rock behind me. “Behind that boulder.”

“What were you doing *there*?”

I raised my eyebrows, and he shook his head. “Never mind. We’re starting to get moving. Is there anything else you need to prepare?”

I looked around in thought, and I caught a glimpse of a pointed hat poking out over the top of a ridge of stones on the side of the mountain.

“As a matter of fact, Chrom, there is.”

“So,” Chrom said, as I caught up to him again, “I heard you met the Brigadier-General.”

“Yeah,” I said, “he’s...quite a character.”

Chrom smiled. “That he is.”

“What’s his connection with Frederick?” I asked.

“They went to the same academy. They became knights together, and they formed a sort of rivalry. But Samuel was promoted up through the ranks, while Frederick ended up being assigned to the protection of the exalt and, eventually, he became the second-in-command of the Shepherds.”

“So Frederick is bitter that he was never given the chance to excel like Samuel?”

Chrom shook his head. “Of course not. He loves this job, although he pretends he doesn’t. No, the real reason why Frederick is bitter towards Samuel is...well...” He nodded his head towards Samuel, who was in deep conversation with Phila.

“The Air Marshal?”

“She’s engaged to the Brigadier-General. Caused a bit of controversy, too. But Emmeryn understands, and I suppose that’s what counts.”

I frowned. “But why would Frederick be bitter...?” The penny dropped. “Oh,” I muttered.

Chrom chuckled. “He does a good job of hiding it all, Frederick. I always tell him not to bottle up his emotions, but you know how he is.”

“I’m surprised,” I said. “I thought Frederick was too...immersed in his work to notice a woman like Phila.”

“I think he immersed himself in his work to *avoid* noticing her,” said Chrom.

I felt sorry for the dutiful knight. “Maybe I should leave him alone from now on.”

“Frederick has endured worse than your jibes, I can assure you.” A horn sounded, and suddenly Chrom was completely serious once more. “Do you have a plan?”

“Yes,” I said. “But hopefully I won’t need to use it.”

“Are you going to inform me on the details?” he asked.

“Let’s just say it involves a ‘secret weapon’.” I winked. “Just leave it to me.”

We marched through the mountain pass, until we reached a narrowing of the path, where it snaked up the side of a particularly tall mountain. The mountain was covered with banners and armoured soldiers, all the colours of Plegia: black and crimson.

Emmeryn lead the Ylisseans down the path, accompanied by the Shepherds and several soldiers. The majority of the army was lying in wait back on the other side of the pass, ready to charge in if any complications arose. But, given that they were being watched, I imagined that the Plegians had some counter-measure ready for when that happened.

Emmeryn stopped at the foot of the mountain, and gazed up at an outcropping of rock about ten feet above the ground. There were two people standing on the outcropping, away from the other soldiers. One of the two was a woman dressed in black, wearing a tight skirt and a low-cut blouse, with black boots. I’ll admit it was a little distracting. I noticed the strange woman’s eyes following me intently, a smirk forming on her face, and so I tried to focus on the other person – a man with red hair and a beard. He was dressed oddly in yellow and black cloth and a bright yellow cape. However, my eyes were drawn to the crown that was perched on top of his head. This strange man, I realised, was King Gangrel.

“What’s this, then?” the king called, mockingly. “The exalt herself, in all her radiance? I fear I must shield my eyes!”

The Mad King’s tone was shrill and irritating, and I could see that some of my companions were shifting around uncomfortably. But Emmeryn was unfazed by the king’s jeering words.

“King Gangrel,” she said, her voice regal and firm, “I’ve come for the truth of this unfortunate incident between us.”

The woman in black, who stood next to Gangrel, spoke next. “The truth? I can give you the truth.”

“Perhaps milady might first share her name?” Emmeryn’s voice was patient.

The woman smirked again, and gave a mocking bow as she said, “You may call me Aversa.”

“Very well, Aversa. Is Maribelle unharmed?”

“Who? Oh yes, that little blonde brat.” The King of Plegia clicked his fingers and a Plegian soldier walked out from behind a nearby rock. The soldier was gripping the arm of none other than Maribelle, who struggled even when the man drew his axe. I could hear the young noble’s insulting words as she was dragged along by the much-larger man.

“Unhand me, you gutter-born troglodyte!” she cried.

Lissa caught sight of her friend and called out, “Maribelle!”

“Lissa? Darling, is that you?” Maribelle’s words earned her a shove from the soldier.

Aversa cleared her throat. “This girl,” she began, “crossed the Plegian border without our consent. And what’s more...” A nasty smile crept across the woman’s face. “She wounded the brave Plegian soldiers who sought only to escort her safely home.”

“Lies!” Maribelle shrieked. “You speak nothing but lies, hag!” She was given another shove.

“You see? No manners at all.” Aversa tutted. “Such a nasty little bird simply *had* to be caged.”

“Such a violent temper is indicative of her guilt,” Gangrel said. “This will call for a weighty punishment. And if she were to later...*confess* to being an Ylislean spy?” Gangrel cackled maliciously. “My goodness! It would take an act of *considerable* good faith to repair our relations.”

I heard Sully mutter, “Bastard,” from somewhere behind me.

“I have done nothing wrong!” Maribelle cried, struggling in vain against the soldier holding her captive. “It is *they* who should confess! *They* are the ones who invaded Ylisle. They burned an entire village to the ground! When I attempted to intervene, they took me and dragged me across the border.” Her tone was desperate as she said, “Let the plundered shops and charred homes of that village serve as my proof!”

“That would only prove Ylisle has a bandit problem,” the Plegian King said, “Something I hear oft of late. But indeed, tonight I shall weep salty tears into my pillow for your dead villagers.”

Gangrel’s words infuriated me. How could a man this disgusting and immoral be allowed to take charge of an entire kingdom? The mutterings from around me showed that my fellow Shepherds felt the same. I could see Chrom’s face growing darker by the second.

Maribelle appealed to the exalt herself. “Your Grace, please!”

Emmeryn’s words brought comfort, as only she could. “Peace, Maribelle. I believe you.” She walked closer to the outcropping upon which the king stood. “King Gangrel, I request that you release this woman at once. Surely you and I can sort out these affairs without the need of hostages.”

Emmeryn’s words, reasonable as they were, only seemed to irritate the Plegian king.

“Without so much as an apology? Why should I even bother with parley? I’m within my rights to have her head this instant and be home in time for supper.” He cackled again.

Chrom’s patience snapped and he cried out, “You black-hearted devil!”

Gangrel eyed the prince as though he were nothing more than a piece of dirt. “Control your dog, my dear, before he gets someone hurt. Haven’t you ever heard of a muzzle?”

Chrom backed down, shuddering with suppressed rage. Sumia, who stood behind him, placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. But not even she could calm him now.

“Now then, *Your Graceliness*,” Gangrel continued. “Perhaps we can arrange a trade? You give me the Fire Emblem, and I return the little madam here in one piece.”

His words spread confusion among the Shepherds and Ylislean soldiers. *The Fire Emblem*? I had heard of the name before: it was an ancient relic kept safe by the Ylislean royal family for centuries. Supposedly, it was used by the first exalt to defeat the Fell Dragon when he attempted to destroy the world. But its name was ubiquitous throughout myth and legend, too.

Emmeryn was just as perplexed as I was. “You would ask for Ylisle’s royal treasure? But why?”

“Because I know the legend!” the king snapped. “The Fire Emblem is the key to having all one’s wishes realized. I have desired it for years! And yet my birthday comes and goes each year, and nothing from Ylisle.” He tittered madly.

The exalt drew herself up to her fullest height. “The Emblem's power is meant for a single purpose, King Gangrel: to save the world and its people at their hour of most desperate need. Would you claim a nobler wish?”

A twisted smile appeared on the face of the Plegian King. “I want what every Plegian wants - a grisly end for every last Ylislean! What could be *nobler* than that?”

His words shocked Emmeryn to the core. “What?” she cried.

“Surely you have not forgotten what the last exalt did to my people? Your father named us heathens! His ‘crusade’ across Plegia butchered countless of my kin!”

A terrible silence fell across the gathered Ylisleans. Chrom, Lissa and Emmeryn looked especially grim.

Eventually, the exalt spoke, “I have never denied Ylisle's past wrongdoings. But I have sworn to never repeat those mistakes. Ours is now a realm of peace,” she said firmly.

The king snarled. “Yours is now a realm of *hypocrisy*! Now give me the Fire Emblem!” he roared, spittle bursting out from between his lips.

Maribelle spoke out once again. “No, Your Grace! I'd sooner die than act as a bargaining chip for this filthy reprobate!”

“No, Maribelle,” the exalt pleaded, but she was interrupted by another rant from the Mad King.

“The time for talking is over! It's time to speak louder than words! I shall have the Emblem if I have to pry it from your shiny, dead hands!”

He signalled with an outstretched fist, and a group of Plegians leaped down from the mountainside and charged at Emmeryn. We all tensed, ready to move, but Chrom was the fastest. In the blink of an eye, he swooped forward and cut down one of the brigands.

“Stay back!” he shouted, brandishing Falchion, “Or you'll all suffer the same fate!”

Gangrel crowed triumphantly. “Now *that's* a declaration of war if I've ever heard one. A big, messy war that will bleed you Ylisleans dry!” He entered into a bout of uncontrollable laughter, before turning on his heel and marching back up the mountain. “Aversa,” he snapped to his aide, “kill the little bitch.” And with that, the Mad King was gone.

“No!” Lissa shrieked, as the soldier who had been holding Maribelle shoved her to the ground and stepped back.

Aversa bent down to the ground, and cupped Maribelle's chin in her hand. She whispered something that obviously caused the girl great distress, before pulling out a knife.

I glanced up at the mountain, searching among the rocks for my ‘secret weapon’. I was not disappointed, as I saw an oversized pointed hat appear over the top of a rock nearby. There was a shout, and a blast of wind filled with magical energy swooped down and hit the woman in black and the soldiers surrounding her, knocking them all over backwards.

Ricken leaped over the rock and sprinted down to where Maribelle lay face-down on the outcropping.

“Come on, Maribelle!” the boy cried. “Hurry!”

Maribelle was stunned to see Ricken, but she gave a shaky nod and allowed herself to be helped up. The two of them ran, away from Aversa and down the side of the mountain.

The dark woman got to her feet, snarling. “You wretched whelp!” She whirled around to face the soldiers gathered behind her. “Kill them all!” she roared.

“Ricken!” I called to the mage. “Run down through the mountain pass and join the others. We’ll catch up!”

“R-Ricken?!” Chrom blurted. “How... what’s he...?”

“My ‘secret weapon’,” I muttered, from next to the prince. “You see what happens when you underestimate people?”

“Robin, you’re a mad bastard.” He sighed and called out, “Rally the troops! The parley is over. We’re retreating!”

But the order came too late. Already, Plegian troops were swarming over the mountaintop. I had no doubt some of them would already be attacking our army back in the valley.

“We have to move,” I said to the others. “Come on!”

We sprinted back through the mountain pass. Waiting for us was Brigadier-General Samuel and Air Marshal Phila. Sure enough, the Plegians had ambushed them from the mountaintops, and had already begun engaging the Ylislean troops.

“Milord,” said Phila, “what is the situation?”

“Negotiations have broken down,” Chrom explained. “The Plegians are hot on our heels. We have to retreat.”

“Understood,” said Samuel, all trace of his casual demeanour now gone and replaced with a level of professionalism that matched Frederick’s. “We’ll hold them off at the pass.”

“The pegasus knights can fend off the ones coming in from above,” said Phila.

“Which leaves the way clear for the Shepherds to escape with Lady Emmeryn,” finished the Brigadier-General.

Chrom wasn’t happy with this arrangement. “I’m not leaving you behind to deal with these Plegian wretches!”

But Phila was firm. “What matters the most is the exalt’s safety. Her Grace will be most secure with you by her side, milord.”

“Listen to them, Chrom,” I told him. “We can’t afford to hesitate.”

Chrom gritted his teeth. “Fine,” he growled. “But I don’t want any of you dying on me.”

“We’ll be fine,” Samuel promised, his smile returning for a brief moment. “Hurry on, milord.”

Chrom nodded. “Shepherds, to me!” he roared, and we charged through the valley, with chaos erupting all around us...

Chapter 9

We arrived back in Ylistol later that evening with minimal casualties. Maribelle was welcomed back into the barracks with open arms. Lissa was overjoyed to see her friend back safe and sound. The noble girl even came up to me and gave me her ‘humble thanks’. I told her it was Ricken she should be thanking. After all, the mage boy was the one who had successfully saved her from the clutches of the Plegians. Ricken, who was present at the time, looked more than a little embarrassed. But even I had been surprised at the boy’s talent and daring. It’s all very well and good to come up with a plan, but to have said plan be executed almost flawlessly by someone? That takes skill.

We were also visited by a pegasus knight that had flown back to Ylistol in order to deliver a message from Air Marshal Phila. I didn’t hear the details of her report, but she came to the barracks after she was told to get some rest by Emmeryn herself. I recognised her as the woman with long, red hair that I had briefly seen talking to Sumia before the parley with Gangrel had begun. But now, her dignified features were marred by her solemn expression. She was clearly shaken by the ordeal at the border. She entered the barracks and was taken to a spare room by Sumia, where she was reluctantly put to bed. I noticed several of the men’s eyes were drawn to the red-haired pegasus knight, and I could see why: she was a beautiful woman, albeit a rather sombre-looking one.

“Hey, Vaike.” I muttered to the blond-haired man after the pegasus knight had left the common area. “Who was that woman just now?”

“Huh?” His eyes didn’t move from the door the pegasus knight had just passed through.

I sighed and repeated the question.

“Oh, that’s Cordelia,” he answered. “She’s a pegasus knight under Phila. One of the best.”

“She’s quite the beauty, too,” I said, causing Vaike’s face to become tinged with red.

“Uh...I guess...”

I was amused, having never seen Vaike act so bashful before. “Maybe you should get to know her better? You obviously want to.”

He shrugged. “Ah, she’d never notice a fella like the Vaike, even with all his muscles. She’s only got eyes for Chrom.”

My eyebrows rose. “Oh really? Do the others know? Does *Chrom* know?”

“The others – definitely. But Chrom wouldn’t know love if it kicked him up the arse.” His tone was bitter, and his crude words caused Maribelle, who was enjoying a warm cup of tea with Virion, to splutter and almost spill her drink.

“I say, Vaike,” the noble girl cried, “must you *always* spout such vulgarities? A foul tongue is indicative of a foul mind.”

“Well said, my dear,” Virion said sycophantically.

Vaike caught my eye, and we both shrugged.

The moment we had returned to the capital, Emmeryn was immediately taken to her quarters in

the royal palace, where guards were now stationed around the clock. Chrom, too, spent much of his time over the next few days locked up in his room, hardly ever visiting the barracks anymore. I knew he felt responsible for starting the war that was now directly threatening the halidom. His guilt only weighed heavier on him when Phila arrived at the palace the next evening to inform us that the Brigadier-General had been killed.

I hoped I would never see the young Air Marshal look so distraught. As she delivered her report to the exalt, with myself, Chrom, Lissa and Frederick present, she broke down in tears, despite her best efforts to stay composed. When the weeping began, Exalt Emmeryn herself walked down to Phila, and embraced her the way a mother would embrace her daughter, regardless of their relative ages. As always, the exalt radiated compassion and peace, and Phila was appeased for long enough to continue her report.

“It was a massacre,” Phila said, still sniffing quietly. “The Plegians bore down on us, riding over the mountaintops with their wyverns. When my pegasus knights attempted a counter-attack, the wyverns pulled back and were replaced by archers. They decimated our troops. We decided a tactical retreat was the best course of action. But Samuel - the Brigadier-General, that is – had his men form a barrier between us and the Plegians. I saw him be cut down by a swarm of wyvern riders. He sacrificed himself to save us.” Her voice cracked, and she bowed to indicate her report was finished.

Emmeryn bowed her head in respect. “He was a good man. His efforts to keep the peace in the halidom will not be forgotten.” She raised her head, and her eyes flashed with a determination that I hadn’t seen there before. “But now, we must turn to the issue of war. I always feared this day would come. I had hoped that I was strong enough to stop this menace. I was wrong.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Emm.” Chrom stood beside her sister and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “You couldn’t have stopped this. No one could.” His eyes narrowed hatefully. “It’s that Mad King who’s to blame. Mark my words; I’ll see him pay for this.”

“I appreciate your desire to see that justice is done, Chrom,” Emmeryn said, “But we mustn’t be hasty. Only patience and good faith will see us through these dark times.”

Chrom took his hand away. “‘Patience and good faith’ can only get us so far. Tomorrow, we’ll send for additional soldiers from Regna Ferox. If we have enough brute force, we can still drive those Plegian bastards back into the hell they came from.”

His words were filled with cold fury. I almost pitied the man who would cross the prince. Emmeryn looked uneasy at her brother’s words, and her concern was mirrored in Lissa’s expression.

“Chrom,” the exalt said, “we mustn’t let hatred blind us. If we do, then Gangrel has already won. As I have said, we must be patient and-”

“We don’t have the time for patience!” Chrom snapped. “Can’t you see that we’re at war, here?!”

“Chrom, please listen to me.”

But Emmeryn’s words went unheeded. “We can’t afford to act slowly! If we do, then Gangrel will strike before we’re ready. We have to take the initiative and fight back against these Plegian dogs!”

“Chrom!” The exalt’s voice grew as close to angry as I would ever hear it go. “Please! Think about what you are-”

“You don’t understand!” he yelled. “Our men are dying, and you would have us just sit back and watch?!”

The audience chamber grew quiet as the grave, filled only with the sound of Chrom’s ragged breathing. Lissa’s eyes were brimming with tears. Even the exalt herself seemed shocked by her brother’s words.

Chrom’s face was filled with shame and guilt at his own reckless anger. He gave a small nod to the exalt and muttered, “If you’ll excuse me.” He practically ran from the chamber.

“Chrom, wait!” Lissa cried.

“I’ll go after him,” I said, walking towards the door Chrom had just departed through.

Frederick made to protest, but I told him, “Your place is here. Now more than ever.” I cast a meaningful look towards Phila, who still looked incredibly shaken.

“I...understand,” the knight said at last.

I nodded and left the audience chamber.

After searching through the palace, I eventually found Chrom wandering the gardens, lost in thought. He sat down on a rock, next to a tree, and rested his head in his hands.

I walked over to him. “Chrom,” I called, and he looked up. I noticed his eyes were more tired than I had ever seen them before.

“Hello, Robin,” he mumbled.

“...Is everything alright?” I asked him.

“I’m just...duelling with some unpleasant thoughts,” he said. “I’ve mostly been thinking about what Gangrel said.”

“You shouldn’t give much thought to that madman’s words,” I told him.

He smiled briefly. “Maybe you’re right.”

I sat down next to him on the rock. We were both quiet for a moment, before he said, “How much do you know about the last war with Plegia?”

“Not much,” I replied. “I was very young. Your father was the exalt at the time, right?”

He nodded. “He led a scourge against the Plegians, supposedly done in the name of Naga. He claimed that they were all heathens for worshipping the Fell Dragon. He was always a very passionate man, my father.” His head turned away from me, and his face was framed in shadow as he said, “It was a brutal campaign, ending only with his death fifteen years ago. Plegia rightfully remembers their suffering, but the war was no kinder to the exalt’s own people. As the fighting dragged on, our army became more and more diminished. Farmers who could barely wield a pitchfork were conscripted and sent to their deaths. Soon there was no food at all, and the halidom began to collapse. I was young,” he admitted, “but I remember those dark times. And I know how they affected Emmeryn.”

“An experience like that would change anyone.”

He grunted. “Indeed. When our father died before her tenth year, he left her quite the legacy:

Plegia's desire for vengeance, our own people's unbridled rage..." He swallowed before saying, "Well, you can imagine. My sister became a target for blame from all sides. Her own subjects began to hurl insults...and stones. She still bears the scar from one." He shook his head. "But she never let them see her pain. Only Lissa and I understood."

Truthfully, I had never even considered the effect the previous exalt's crusade would have had on his own family. I was aghast. "It must have been so hard..."

Chrom looked me in the eye and said, "I cannot claim to know how she does it, Robin. I'm not like her. I could never greet such hostility with warmth and patience." He chuckled darkly. "I *still* can't. You saw how I acted in there. I want to make those Plegians pay for what they've done. But Emmeryn...she always sees the bigger picture.

"While our people mocked and vilified her, she reached out and healed them. She brought soldiers home to their families. She ended the war. And when Ylisse's spirit was mended and the people 'forgave' her? She never resented them for it." His voice was full of admiration. "She represents the best of the halidom: the part most worth protecting. She *is* peace, Robin." His eyes narrowed. "But some men would take advantage of that. Men like King Gangrel. The day he understands peace will be the day death gives it to him." He stood up, looking up into the night sky. "So perhaps I must be death's agent. Emmeryn would never order him killed, nor would I wish her to. But this war will cripple the halidom if it continues. I won't let that happen. I won't make the same mistakes as my father."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "You're not like him, Chrom. And neither is Emmeryn."

"I hope you're right, Robin."

I gave him a reassuring smile, one he returned. But something behind him caught my eye, a small shrub that seemed to move on its own. But the breeze was calm, and the night's air was still, albeit a bit cold for this time of year. Too late, I realised the danger, as the shrub was cut apart by a blade that glinted in the moonlight, revealing its wielder: a hooded man, dressed in black.

My voice caught in my throat. "Chrom!" I croaked in shock, as the assassin sprinted towards us with frightening speed, blade held aloft. Chrom reacted quickly, sensing the assassin's presence before he really saw him, drawing Falchion and swinging it towards the hooded man. By sheer luck – or perhaps it was fate – Chrom's sword cleaved through the assassin's abdomen, killing him almost instantly. The hooded man fell to the ground, in two pieces.

My breath came in gasps. I was truly shocked by the sudden appearance of the assassin. Chrom, on the other hand, seemed unfazed as he bent down to examine the corpse that lay on the ground. He pulled back the dead man's hood, revealing an unfamiliar face.

"Chrom," I said, "that man came here to kill you."

He nodded. "But I can't find any identification on him. If he's a Plegian soldier, he hasn't brought any official documents with him."

"But..." I frowned. "There's something off about all this."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't the assassin seem a bit underwhelming?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

"If someone wanted *you*, of all people, dead, they'd surely send someone capable of doing the

job.”

“Or, alternatively,” Chrom muttered, “they could send a group.”

My heart jolted, realising the implications of Chrom’s words just as another nearby shrub parted and a second assassin leaped out. This time, there was no time for a warning. The assassin darted over the grass and plunged his sword into Chrom’s gut.

The prince’s eyes widened, blood trickling from his mouth as he stared at his attacker. Once again, fortune prevailed, as the assassin’s blade stuck in Chrom’s armour when he tried to withdraw it, leaving the man wide open for a strike. I drew my sword and yelled as loudly as I could as I swung my blade towards the assassin’s exposed neck. A sickening sound and a splash of blood accompanied the man’s decapitation. His body fell to the ground, while his head landed some distance away.

Chrom coughed and hacked. The blade was now pulled free from his flesh, allowing the blood to flow out of the wound. I called his name weakly, over and over, as he collapsed to the ground.

“There...will be others...” His words came as a croaking whisper.

“Others?” I echoed numbly. I bent down to hear his quiet words.

“Assassins...in the palace...” He swallowed a mouthful of blood. “They’re after...Emm...” He grabbed my collar, pulling me down further. “You...have to help her...”

“I’ll get you help, Chrom,” I promised. “We’ll find Lissa, and she can heal you right up, okay?” My voice quivered, like a small child’s.

“Just...leave me...” he gasped. “Emmeryn...she’s...she’s the...”

“No more talking,” I told him firmly. “I’m taking you to Lissa. We can deal with the other assassins after that.”

I lifted him up over my shoulder, and together we limped towards the palace. I would hear no more arguing from him after that. Whether my actions that night were a mistake or not, I didn’t regret saving Chrom.

On the way inside, we bumped into Frederick.

“Bad news, milord, Robin,” he said. “We found a thief skulking around the...” His eyes widened as he noticed the state Chrom was in. “What has happened?” he breathed.

“There were assassins in the garden,” I explained. “Both are dead now, but one of them stabbed Chrom.”

“How could this happen?” Frederick snarled. “Our defences are tighter now than ever! How could two cutthroats have broken into the palace, along with a thief?!”

“I think the exalt’s life is in danger,” I said. “There may be other assassins in the palace. We have to hurry.”

“But...milord Chrom is...” Frederick looked lost and dazed, for the first time since I had met him.

“I checked the wound, and I don’t think it’s too deep. Certainly not beyond healing. Where is Lissa?”

“She’s with Sully and Stahl,” Frederick said. “We apprehended a thief, as I mentioned, and the two of them were watching over him.”

“Take me to them,” I ordered.

I allowed Frederick to carry Chrom. He did a much better job at it than I had, anyway. I followed him to a small, confined room, with a wooden floor and ceiling. Inside were Lissa, Sully and Stahl, along with an orange-haired stranger who was dressed in dark clothes.

“Hey, Robin,” Lissa greeted me as we walked in. “We found...” She gasped as she saw her only brother in Frederick’s arms, drenched with blood. “Oh gods, *Chrom!*”

“Can you heal him?” I heard the desperation in my voice.

Frederick lay Chrom down on a small bed in the room, allowing Lissa to examine the wound. I noticed her placing a small satchel, which she had been holding, on the bed, in order to get to work.

“I...I think so.” Her face was still a mask of shock. “But, what happened?”

“Some assassins have broken into the castle,” Frederick explained. “We believe they are trying to murder Lady Emmeryn.”

Stahl’s eyes widened. “Assassins?!” he cried, turning to the orange-haired man. “Are you involved in this?”

The stranger lifted up his hands in mock surrender. “Easy there, bub. I’m not here to hurt anyone.”

Frederick folded his arms. “Yet you run with a band of assassins?”

“Believe it or not, I’m just trying to make a living. I’m a thief, see? Bust open doors, crack into chests, that kind of thing. This lot told me they wanted to break into some type of vault. Nobody said anything about murder. I’d just as soon sit this one out.”

“If you’re so against this whole idea, then will you help us fend off these cutthroats?” I asked.

“Robin,” Frederick said, “do you honestly believe we can trust this man? A self-professed thief?”

“We need all the help we can get in order to save Emmeryn’s life,” I said. “This man appears capable, and we could use any information he has about the assassins.”

“I agree with Robin,” Stahl said. “Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Sully eyed Chrom’s unconscious body. “And damned if *we* aren’t desperate, too.”

The thief folded his arms, thinking hard. “Alright, I’ll prove my sincerity...if you sweeten the deal.” His eyes glittered with greed as they fell upon the bag Lissa had left on the bed. With remarkable speed, his hand reached out and snatched the bag. “Let’s see what we’ve got *here...*”

Lissa cried out, “Wait! Those are my...”

But the thief had already opened the bag and shaken its contents out into his waiting hand. A small collection of liquorice sticks, lollipops and assorted sweets landed in the thief’s open palm.

The thief’s mouth dropped open, his eyes becoming round as saucers. “S-sugar...” he whispered reverently. He leaped to his feet, exclaiming “It’s a deal! I’ll help you save the exalt, provided I get to hold onto these sweets.”

We were all stunned by the sudden change in the robber's personality. I looked to Lissa. "Is that alright?"

Lissa pouted, but said, "I guess we have more important things to worry about."

"Nice!" the orange-haired man crowed, scooping the sweets into his bag for later consumption. "Consider this an advance payment. I'll require double this if we manage to save Her Grace."

"Robin, is this really wise?" Frederick asked.

"We don't have time to argue!" I snapped. "Frederick, I want you to stay here and watch over Lissa as she heals Chrom. Stahl and Sully, I want you to run to the barracks and see if you can find some of the other Shepherds. Bring them back here as soon as possible." I turned to the thief. "And..."

"Gaius."

"Right, Gaius, you're coming with me."

"And what are 'we' doing?" he asked.

"We're going to save the exalt."

"And you're certain this is a shortcut?" I asked Gaius, as he fumbled with some books on a bookshelf in the palace library.

"Trust me, Bubbles, I know what I'm doing."

"...What did you just call me?"

Gaius made a triumphant noise, and tilted one of the great tomes away from the shelf. There was a click that resonated within the wall, and the entire bookshelf slid to the right on some kind of hidden mechanism, revealing a dark hole in the wall behind it.

"A secret passage." I was quietly impressed. Did Chrom or any of the others know this was here? "How did you find this?"

"When you work for as long as I have at this, you get a sort of knack for it." He ducked in through the hole and called out to me, "Watch your head, Bubbles."

"Why do you keep calling me 'Bubbles'?"

"Dunno." Gaius shrugged. "Suits you somehow."

I shook my head. How could someone this...*eccentric* be such a skilful thief?

We fell silent as we walked through the dark passageway. There were no torches of any kind, and so we made our way slower than I would have liked, running our hands along the walls to guide our steps.

"Judging by the direction, this'll take us out near the Great Hall," Gaius told me. "From there on, I'm in the dark."

“But we’re already in the dark,” I pointed out.

“I *mean* I won’t know where to go from there, smartass. First time being in the royal palace, you know. Don’t have the whole layout memorised.”

“You could’ve fooled me.” A thought struck me. “Could you tell me about the people who hired you to break in here?”

“Not much to say, really. I never met the boss. None of ‘em would tell me anything about who they were or what they were after, until just a little while ago. I thought this was gonna be a routine job until I heard we were gunning for the exalt. I tell ya, Bubbles, it shook me to the core. That’s why I tried to contact that Prince Chrom fella.”

“You went looking for Chrom?”

“Sure did. You think I would’ve let myself get caught if I didn’t *want* to be?”

Arrogant as he may have been, Gaius was proving to be an invaluable help. I just hoped it would be enough to save Emmeryn.

The dark passageway began to brighten, enough for me to see the edges of Gaius’ face as we walked. Soon, we had reached what I thought was a dead end.

“How do we get out?” I asked.

Gaius reached into his mouth, pulling out the stick of a lollipop he had been sucking on for the last couple of minutes. He brought the stick down into a tiny hole in the wall, almost invisible in the darkness. There was a click, just like before, and the wall slid away to reveal a corridor.

“Like candy from a babe,” Gaius muttered, as we strolled out onto the carpeted floor, with the wall sliding back into place behind us.

There were hushed voices coming from down the corridor – the assassins.

“The Great Hall’s that way,” Gaius muttered. “That close to the exalt’s place?”

“...I don’t know,” I confessed.

Gaius stared at me. “You don’t know? I thought you were supposed to be a Shepherd?”

“I joined a week ago. I’ve only been inside the palace two or three times.”

I felt sick to my stomach. With everything that had happened, I hadn’t had time to come up with a plan for rescuing Emmeryn.

“If only Chrom were here,” I whispered.

“Hey,” Gaius said, with a gentle tone that I hadn’t heard him use before, “we’ll find her. A good thief knows how to think on his feet.” He sneaked off down the corridor, to where it joined with a perpendicular hallway. He edged up along the wall, then peered around the corner. He waved me over, signalling that the coast was clear.

“If we can get through the Great Hall,” I said. “Then we can pass through to the audience chamber. The exalt’s quarters won’t be far away from there. I hope,” I added quietly.

Gaius nodded, and we crept along the corridor, expecting armed men with hoods to appear from

every shadow. Or, at least, *I* was expecting it. Gaius, on the other hand, seemed completely relaxed. I supposed that this was what he was used to.

He was, however, completely thrown off guard by the appearance of what looked like a giant rabbit, bounding on all fours through the halls of the palace.

The rabbit-creature's claws and mouth were stained with blood, and it struck a fearsome sight as it crossed our paths.

"Man alive," Gaius breathed.

The creature's nose twitched, and its head swivelled in our direction. We froze. Slowly, excruciatingly, the rabbit-beast crawled towards us. My first instinct was to turn and bolt, but I was fascinated by the appearance of this creature in a place like this.

As it drew close, the rabbit's nose twitched again, and it opened its mouth. A strangely-feminine voice said, "You have an unusual scent, man-spawn."

Gaius jumped, and I cried out.

"The orange-headed one reeks of sugar. But you..." The beast's eyes stared holes into me. "You are not here for the exalt's life. State your purpose."

"A giant...talking...*rabbit*?" Gaius choked.

I couldn't believe my eyes. "A taguel," I whispered.

The beast reared up on its hind legs. "So you know our true name?"

"Of course," I said. "But I never thought I'd see one alive. I had heard they were all hunted to extinction years ago."

"You are correct, strange man-spawn," the beast said, its voice filled with bitterness. "My kin were driven from their homes and slaughtered as though we were animals."

"You look like an animal to me," Gaius muttered.

The taguel snarled. "That is the ignorance of the humans that murdered my people! I despise men such as you!"

"But wait!" I cried, hoping to prevent my new companion from being butchered by this creature. "If you hate humans so much, then why are you here?"

The taguel looked at me, and before my eyes, the beast seemed to shrink down, transforming into a tall, muscular woman. Her hair was long, and there were two floppy ears dangling from her head. Other than that, and her tail, she seemed almost...normal, albeit with that same expression of ferocity that I often witnessed on Sully's face. I heard Gaius make a quiet sound of approval from beside me.

"My warren owes a debt to the house of Ylisse," the taguel woman said. "I was informed of the attempt on the exalt's life and I seek to save her."

"Then help us," I said. "We're trying to save Emmeryn as well."

"We'd never let anyone harm her," Gaius said. "Cross my heart."

The woman's expression still spoke of her suspicion, but she nodded. "Very well. I know not of

this 'crossing' business, but your hearts do not betray you. Allow me to join you. But do not think of me as a friend," she warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Whiskers," Gaius muttered.

The taguel's eyes narrowed, and she opened her mouth to say something.

"We're running out of time," I interrupted her. "Emmeryn - the exalt, that is - is in danger!"

The taguel nodded again, shifting back into the form of a beast. "Follow me," she said.

The taguel woman led us through a series of corridors, which branched out into a large room I recognised as the Great Hall. I caught sight of several assassins, creeping through the shadows of the hall. The taguel snarled, and bounded after them with her claws outstretched.

Gaius winced as the taguel tore into the unsuspecting assassins. "I almost feel sorry for the bastards," he said. He popped a boiled sweet into his mouth, which seemed to reassure him.

Once all of the assassins were dead, we sprinted through the Great Hall and I led my strange new companions into the audience chamber. All the while, I felt a feeling of dread deep inside me.

What if I'm too late? I thought to myself. How could I ever look Chrom in the eye again if I let his sister die?

No. I won't let that happen. I can't.

"Hey, Bubbles." Gaius called me out of my anxious thoughts. "Shouldn't there be, I dunno, guards or something?"

He was right. The audience chamber was completely empty, eerily so.

The taguel's nose twitched once again, and Gaius asked her, "You smell somethin', Whiskers?"

The giant rabbit glared hatefully at him. "What is this moniker you have given me?"

"Just a term of endearment." Gaius innocently stuck his hands in his pockets.

"My name is Panne," the taguel growled. "I have no other name." Her tone was firm.

"Fine by me, Whiskers."

Panne snapped her jaws at the skinny thief. I decided to intervene. "Do you know where the exalt is?" I asked.

"I can only smell two people," Panne said, gesturing towards a door behind the throne. "Through there."

We opened the door to find a corridor, with a floor covered with a carpet of elegant design. The air was perfumed heavily, and the overall tidiness and noble style of the corridor lead to believe that these were the exalt's quarters.

"This stench offends my senses," Panne pawed at her sensitive nose.

"But you're certain that there's someone in here?" I asked her.

"I do not lie, man-spawn. Nor am I mistaken."

“Very well. Let’s go.”

Fortunately for us, the corridor lead straight to the exalt’s chamber. Gaius picked the lock expertly, but when he pushed open the door, a lance appeared only inches away from his face.

“Who dares trespass upon the chamber of the exalt?” a familiar voice cried.

I rushed in, pushing past Gaius, with my hands raised. “Phila, it’s me! Robin!”

The pegasus knight faltered. “What...? What are you doing here?”

“The exalt’s life is in peril,” I explained. “A band of assassins have broken into the palace. Two of them attacked Chrom. He’s wounded, but alive.”

“How...how could this have happened?” Phila glared at my companions. “And who are these two?”

“My name is Panne.” The taguel woman had returned once again to her human form. “I am of the taguel race.”

I heard a gasp from within the room, and Emmeryn appeared in my field of vision, behind Phila.

“A taguel,” she said, her voice full of wonder. “I am honoured to be in your presence. But why have you come here on this dark night?”

“I was foretold of the assassins’ presence here tonight.”

“You came here to save me?”

Panne sniffed disdainfully. “My debt to Ylisse extends only to its ruler. I do not care for any humans, whoever they may be.”

“How dare you?!” Phila scowled at the taguel woman.

“Peace, Phila,” the exalt hushed her aide. “I would hear what this brave woman has to say.”

“...My fellow taguel were hunted and butchered many years ago by humans such as yourself.”

Emmeryn’s hand flew up to her breastbone. “What?! Is this true?”

“Do not act so shocked. You humans are all the same. Right down to your base desire to ruin and destroy all you touch. Even each other.”

Phila gripped her lance tightly, but Emmeryn said, “Perhaps there is truth to your words. I’m told that, in taguel society, everyone is treated as an equal. Mankind could have learned much from your warren. The words may come too late and mean too little, but I am deeply sorry. We have stolen your friends and family and made the world a lesser place.” The exalt bowed low towards the taguel, who looked slightly taken aback, although she tried to hide it.

Phila protested. “Your Grace, you had no fault in this!”

“You claim to be blameless, and yet you would apologize?” Panne scoffed. “Your words are but wind.”

Emmeryn was solemn. “I know...but they are all I have.”

Panne looked at the exalt with something akin to respect. “You seem sincere, man-spawn. You

feel my pain as your own. I've never felt that before. Look at me, see what I am. I will never trust mankind. But you..." Panne shook her head, her long ears swaying from side to side. "Perhaps you truly are not like the others."

Emmeryn smiled gently. "All I ask is a chance to earn your trust."

Phila took advantage of the pause in discussion to level her gaze at Gaius, who stood awkwardly in the doorway, looking thoroughly out of place. "And who are you?"

"Don't mind me, Angel." He raised his arms in mock surrender. "I'm just your average thief, tryin' to make his way in the world."

Phila's eyes narrowed. "So you confess your guilt?"

"The only thing I'm guilty of is having a sweet tooth. That, and grand larceny. But, hey, who cares about the details?"

"He helped us to find this place," I explained to Phila. "He's proven his own trustworthiness."

"I don't appreciate having thieves in the presence of the exalt," Phila growled.

"Phila," Emmeryn said, "do not fret. This man will do us no harm. I believe he has a good and noble soul."

Gaius looked down at his feet. "Well, I dunno about that, Your Grace."

"Perhaps," I said, "we can talk about this another time. There are still assassins lurking around the palace."

"None of them will enter this room," Phila promised.

The sound of footsteps reverberated down the corridor, alerting us the arrival of the cutthroats. Gaius and I drew our swords, with Panne transforming once again. An assassin rounded the corner and swung his blade towards Gaius, who parried and countered with rapid speed, cutting down the attacker before he could enter the exalt's chamber. Two more followed, only to be swiftly defeated by myself, Gaius and Panne.

Panne sniffed the air. "I do not smell any more men coming for us. We may be safe."

I frowned. "'*May be* safe'?"

"Can you not sense that foreboding presence?" she asked.

Gaius scratched the back of his neck. "Come to think of it, I do feel kind of jittery. I just thought it was the sugar rush."

"I sense dark power drawing near." Emmeryn's voice called out to us from inside the chamber.

"I don't sense anything," I muttered. "I think..."

I didn't get to finish my thought, for I was interrupted by a flash of light, accompanied by a scream, that came from the exalt's room. We all dashed into the chamber, only to see Emmeryn collapsing to the ground, blood leaking out of her mouth. Standing on the spot where the exalt had stood only moments before was a tall, bearded man, dressed in black robes and holding a tome that I recognised as being used for Dark Magic. His eyes glittered with menace, and his mouth twisted into a smile as he said, "Your precious exalt is dead. Now watch as your halidom falls into

ruin!”

“You bastard!” I shouted.

His gaze turned to me, and we locked eyes. Immediately, I felt a chill run down my spine. His sickening smile grew even wider when he saw me, and he let out a cold laugh as his body began to glow.

“So *this* is where you have hidden all this time.” The dark man’s voice echoed through the chamber, as though it were coming from the walls themselves. “The Emblem eludes us yet. Well, no matter. I may not have succeeded in my task here tonight, but I see now that fate has still rewarded me for my efforts. You will return to me in due time.” He laughed again, and the light enveloped him. When the light faded, he was gone. He had vanished without a trace.

Phila sprinted to the exalt’s side, grasping the woman’s wrist and fumbling for a pulse. After a moment, she shook her head, and tears began to fall from her closed eyelids.

My legs gave out from underneath me. I collapsed to the floor, and my eyes were riveted to the exalt’s corpse.

“What am I going to tell Chrom?” I breathed.

But, in truth, Emmeryn’s death was not what had me so shaken. It had been the appearance of her killer that had chilled me to the core. Everything about him – his face, his voice, his eyes and his clothes – all seemed terribly familiar, as if from a long-forgotten dream.

I know that man, I realised. Even seeing him for that brief moment, I had felt a connection that ran deep in my blood.

A memory sprang up, unbidden, from the depths of my subconscious. I saw myself at a very young age, holding a tome and casting a Wind spell. But instead of my mother praising me for my efforts, there was only the dark man, his eyes filled with pride and greed.

“Well done, Robin. My dear boy, you will go far.”

I knew, deep down within myself, that the man in the black robes, the man who had murdered the exalt, was my father.

Somewhere, in the dark recesses of my mind, a cold voice began to laugh.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

This chapter features the introduction of another OC. This one will be around a lot longer than the last.

Emmeryn's funeral was held two days after her death. It seemed like the entire halidom had turned up to honour the exalt's memory. Looking around me during the service, I began to appreciate just how many lives she had touched. Throughout the funeral, all the way up to the burial and even after, Lissa was inconsolable. She was frequently sobbing into the chest of anyone who would allow her to, be they Frederick, Chrom or even Sully. Frankly, it was disturbing to see the girl who had always been such a beacon of cheer look so thoroughly miserable.

But Chrom...he just looked dead. His eyes were blank and unseeing, blood-shot from a sleepless night or two. Throughout his sister's funeral, he didn't say a single word. Sumia was with him as much as she possibly could, but I don't know if he even realised she was there.

I myself felt detached from the whole affair. I was a newcomer; I hardly even knew Emmeryn. But seeing Chrom, Lissa and the other Shepherds the way they were, it hit me just how important the exalt had been in their lives. Vaike, who was remarkably sombre, told me how he had once been a delinquent from a poor Ylissean village, before Emmeryn showed up one day. She made a speech that affected Vaike so much, he underwent a radical change and vowed to become a great fighter. Seeing someone like 'the Vaike' so distraught would be enough to bring anyone's spirits down. Even Miriel, who I had thought to be incapable of showing emotion, looked lost and dazed.

The only one I could see who wasn't visibly upset by Emmeryn's demise was Lon'qu, although I wasn't surprised. The Feroxi warrior was stoic to a fault. He, too, was a newcomer to the Shepherds. It was likely he had never even met the exalt before her untimely death. Nonetheless, the atmosphere of the day affected him still. During the burial, as Emmeryn's coffin was being lowered into the earth, Lissa let out a wail, turned around and, finding only Lon'qu, and began sobbing into the myrmidon's chest. Lon'qu, who would carry his fear of women throughout his lifetime, showed no reaction to Lissa's presence. His blank stare mirrored Chrom's. It wasn't until a few minutes later that his eyes drifted downwards, and his face froze in terror. He pushed Lissa away as tactfully as he could. Even in her tearful daze, Lissa seemed to understand his actions, and she nodded shakily.

Once the burial had finished, Chrom returned to the palace, locked himself in his room and wouldn't open the door for anybody. Nearly every Shepherd went around knocking on the door at least once over the next few days, trying in vain to get Chrom to open up. But not even Frederick was allowed in. I was sure that, since Emmeryn had passed on, Chrom was supposed to be living in the exalt's quarters. None of us had the heart to tell him, but I believe he knew it himself.

The days dragged on in the barracks. With Emmeryn's death, all of the life and energy had been drained out of the Shepherds. I suspected that most of this was down to Lissa, who would put people at ease with her warmth and demeanour in most circumstances, but was unable to do so while mourning the loss of her sister.

My suspicions were confirmed by Lon'qu, of all people, not long after the funeral. We were sitting outside the barracks, watching the others train without much enthusiasm. I tried to make conversation with the Feroxi warrior.

"So..." I said, "the barracks have been very quiet lately. Even Sully doesn't seem all that invested," I noted, as we watched the red cavalier spar with Stahl. Ordinarily, Sully would have been wiping the floor with him, but now they were evenly matched. Each blow from one weapon was parried easily by the other, without much effort. It was a discouraging sight. "The way things are now, everyone will end up just as grumpy as *you*."

"..."

"It's hard to imagine that one woman's death can affect the lives of so many people. Even if that woman were one such as Emmeryn."

"..."

"I'm sorry you had to join the Shepherds at a time like this."

"...Tell me something, tactician."

I was surprised that I had actually managed to get him to talk. "What is it?"

"Why did you come to me for conversation?"

"Because," I said, "you're the only one who would listen."

"...Is that so?"

"Ever since the exalt's death, everyone's been completely out of it. I've been going around the barracks trying to talk to the others, but they're always off in their own little worlds. I suppose that's to be expected when dealing with grief," I admitted. "Even Virion doesn't play chess nearly as well as he used to. Of course, I still lose to him nine times out of ten." I shook my head. "But you...even though you don't respond very often, I can tell you're always listening, always observing. Am I correct?"

"..."

I smiled, knowing my words were reaching him. "Even as I speak, you're gauging the actions and reactions of all the Shepherds. Why else would you be hanging around the training area all day, but never taking part?"

"I don't linger here *all* day," Lon'qu protested.

"Yeah, you do," I shot back. "I've seen you. You're observing the performances of the others."

"And how do you know this?"

"Because that's exactly what *I* do. We're more alike than you'd think."

"..."

"So tell me, Lon'qu, what have you discovered from your observations?"

The man sighed. "You're very persistent."

"Naturally."

Lon'qu was silent for a moment, before saying, "I've seen this kind of dynamic before in other groups of mercenaries in Ferox. Each one of the Shepherds has their own role to play: Chrom leads; the man called Frederick attends to him; the female mage gathers information; the two cavaliers support each other. Even that armoured man provides assistance, even though he goes largely unnoticed."

"Aha!" I crowed. "So you've seen Kellam, as well? You *are* a sharp one. Er, go on."

"One of the most important roles is to boost morale. The princess is a beacon of radiance among the people, just as the exalt was. She is an integral part of the group."

"Lissa?" I folded my arms in thought. "So it's true. I hadn't realised just how much the Shepherds depended on her until her support was gone."

"Her presence energises the others. It puts them at ease."

"Oh really?" I smirked. "Does she put *you* at ease?"

"Around women, I am *never* at ease," Lon'qu replied.

"I'm impressed, Lon'qu. You've only been with us for a few days, and yet you've learned so much about the Shepherds that I hadn't even considered. We'd make fine partners, you and I."

The dark-haired man grimaced. "I work better alone."

I shrugged, and the conversation ended.

A few days later, I paid a visit to the palace, only to find Sumia standing outside Chrom's room. She was nervously pacing back and forth past the door, holding a flower in her hands. The floor was littered with petals the same colour as the flower and, indeed, she seemed to be plucking them out one-by-one, muttering fervently to herself as she went. She had such an intense look of concentration on her face that I nearly felt sorry to interrupt her.

"Sumia," I called, causing her to jump.

"Oh, Robin!" She hid the half-shredded flower hurriedly behind her back. "I didn't see you there!"

"Did you come to see Chrom, as well?" I asked.

"W-well, yes..." She glanced at the door worriedly. "I want to know how he's doing, but I thought that I might be bothering him if I knocked on the door, so..."

"So you started plucking the petals from that poor flower?" I raised an eyebrow.

Sumia huffed, more irritated than I had ever seen her. "My flower petal fortunes have been proven to help with indecisiveness!"

"Really?" I pointed to the floor and the mass of petals that covered it. "Because it looks as though you've been through *several* flowers."

Sumia looked down at her feet, her expression becoming glum, and I suddenly felt bad for her.

"Come on," I said, giving her a smile. "We'll talk to Chrom together."

I rapped on the door. "Chrom? It's me, Robin. Open up!"

There was silence. Sumia looked even more glum.

“He’s been like this for days,” she mumbled. “I hope he’s been eating properly.”

I slammed on the door with my fist, ignoring Sumia’s quiet gasp. “Chrom! Can you hear me?! I said open up!”

But there was only silence coming from the other side.

“Maybe he’s asleep...?” Sumia muttered hopefully.

I tried again, slamming my fist against the door as hard as I could. “I swear to all the gods, Chrom, if you don’t open up this door right now, I’ll burn it down! Do you know how much the others have been fretting over your sorry arse? Sumia’s been worried sick! Is this how the new ruler of Ylisse treats his friends? His *family*? Some exalt,” I scoffed.

The door swung open, revealing Chrom’s blazing eyes and bared teeth. Sumia gasped when she saw him, and that caught his attention. He was so stunned that he momentarily forgot about his anger with me. “Sumia? What are you doing here?”

Sumia was taken aback, and she looked down at her feet again. I explained on her behalf. “She came here to see *you*, Chrom. She wanted to talk, but it’s hard to make conversation with a *closed door*,” I sneered.

Chrom glared at me, anger returning in full force.

“Go on,” I goaded him, “hit me. Punch me right in my smug, little face. I know you want to.”

Chrom gritted his teeth and clenched his right fist, drawing it back. I prepared for the blow to arrive, but it never did. Chrom’s fist dropped and his angry expression turned to sorrow. “You make a compelling argument,” he said, “but it’s not *you* I’m angry with.”

“Even after everything I said just now?”

“There’s nothing you said that hadn’t already occurred to me over the last few days.”

He turned away from us and walked into the room. “Come in,” he said, his voice full of exhaustion.

I looked at Sumia, who was still rather upset by what had just occurred, before following Chrom into his chamber.

The room was a mess. The bedsheets were tangled, and the pillows were stained. The curtains were drawn, leaving the chamber in near-darkness. Books, scrolls and quills were strewn all over the floor. But I noticed one thing perched on Chrom’s desk that I recognised from a picture in a book I had read so long ago, and it gave me a small sense of comfort: the Fire Emblem. I was glad the assassins hadn’t stolen it. Once I pulled the curtains back, flooding the room with light, I saw that Chrom was also a mess. His eyes were still blood-shot, and bleary. His face was gaunt, and he even had some stubble growing under his chin. He was a long way from the warrior prince that had saved me on that night in Southern Ylisse.

“Gods, Chrom,” I muttered, “you look terrible.”

He rubbed his eyes, unused to the bright light that was now streaming into the room. “I know. I... haven’t been sleeping very well.”

“Do you want me to get you something?” Sumia asked from where she stood near the door, as though afraid to come in any further. “I have some herbs that are great for restless sleepers.”

Chrom wouldn’t meet her eye. “Thanks, Sumia. But I deserve this. This is my punishment for... letting Emm die.” His voice cracked.

“Chrom,” I said, “Emmeryn’s death wasn’t your fault.”

“Of *course* it was my fault!” Chrom snapped. “If that assassin hadn’t got me when he did, I would’ve been able to save her! I could’ve done something!”

“You couldn’t have known that he was going to be there,” I reassured him. “No one can foresee the future.”

“But I should’ve been more careful. I’m the leader of the Shepherds, gods dammit! I can’t let my guard down for one second! If I do...then people die.” He raised his hands to his face in despair and exhaustion.

I was going to say something, but Sumia suddenly walked into my field of vision. She stood in front of Chrom and, without saying a word, she wrapped her arms around him, holding him in her embrace. Chrom stiffened, surprised by the sudden contact. He was even more surprised when he realised that it was *Sumia* that was holding him. I noticed the colour begin to rise in his face. Eventually, he lowered his arms and returned the embrace. Seeing the two of them there, I felt a pang of jealousy, although I couldn’t say why.

After I felt the moment had gone on long enough, I coughed loudly, and the two immediately leaped out of each other’s arms, blushing furiously.

“See, Chrom?” I said. “There are people who care about you. You’re never alone. So...no locked doors anymore, alright?”

Chrom nodded, and I felt the need to change the subject. “So, how’s your wound? You know, the one that cutthroat gave you?”

Chrom looked down, and rolled up the front of his shirt, revealing his bare abdomen. Sumia blushed even harder, and turned away from the exposed flesh. But I could clearly see a large, purple scar, just above Chrom’s navel.

“Even with all of Lissa’s healing,” Chrom said, “I could have that scar for the rest of my life. She told me it did some serious damage to my organs. I suppose it’ll serve as a reminder.”

“A reminder of what?”

“Emmeryn,” he said, “and the people who took her away from us.” His face grew dark, as he lowered his shirt-front again. “I’ll never forgive them for this, Robin. I’ll see that Kind Gangrel burns in hell.”

“You think it was the Plegians?” I asked, knowing full well that they were, at least, involved.

“Who else could it have been? They came for the Emblem, I’m certain of it. Luckily, they didn’t manage to find it before we fought them off.” He grimaced. “But with Emm out of the picture, that leaves Ylisse without a leader. A perfect opportunity for them to strike.”

“But Ylisse *does* have a leader,” I pointed out.

Chrom shook his head. “Look at me, Robin. I’m powerless. I can never be the person Emm was,

let alone the leader.”

“Chrom,” Sumia began, but I beat her to the punch.

“I was powerless once, too, remember? And yes, alone, I don't think either one of us is half the person your sister was,” I admitted. “But together...maybe we can be something more. If you fall, I'll be there to pull you back up. When you fight for your sister's ideals, I'll be by your side. You don't have to become your sister, you know. You can still be true to yourself. You just have to give people hope in whatever way you can.”

Sumia was speechless, but Chrom still had his doubts.

“And what if I can't? What if I'm not worthy of her ideals? Robin, what if I drag you down with me? Or Sumia? Or any of the others?”

“If you aren't worthy, you'll keep at it until you are. And if we both fall down...” I shrugged. “Well, that's what friends are for, isn't it? And I know the others feel the same.”

“That's right,” Sumia said. “We *all* feel your pain, Chrom. Lady Emmeryn meant so much to us, too. I have faith in you. I know you'll become a great leader, worthy of your family's name. And that of your sister's.”

Chrom looked deep into her eyes. “You're...you're right. Thank you, Sumia, Robin. Your words mean more than either of you could know.”

The tension in the room was rising again, as the two of them looked into each other's eyes. Not wanting to be the one to interrupt this tender moment, I quickly excused myself. “I'll see you down at the barracks later, Chrom.”

Chrom mumbled, “Yeah, later.”

I practically ran from the room.

A short while after I had arrived back at the barracks, I bumped into Lissa. She had been crying again, I could see. But she gave me a watery smile and a “Hi, Robin.”

“Hello, Lissa,” I said. “How are you doing?”

“I'm alright,” she mumbled. “Were you at the palace just now?”

“I certainly was. I talked to Chrom, in fact.”

Her eyes widened. “He came out of his room? What did you say to him?!”

“Er...maybe it's best if I didn't tell you. Male conversation, that sort of thing.”

She pouted, prompting me to say, “You don't have to be like that. It makes me feel like I should buy you an ice-cream.”

She giggled, and I felt happy that I was able to cheer her up, even a little bit.

Soon, a cry came up from outside the barracks, “He's back!”

I stood up. "That'll be Chrom," I said.

"Already?!" Lissa cried. "That was fast."

I chose not to comment.

Chrom arrived along with Sumia. They were holding hands, I saw. Chrom had cleaned up and given himself a shave. He looked much younger than the grieving man I had found in his room earlier. He was freshly bathed and, I noticed with an odd realisation, so was Sumia. I decided against mentioning that fact as the two of them walked in through the front door, and were immediately accosted by the Shepherds.

"Welcome back, Captain!"

"What took ya so long?"

"Great to see you again, Captain!"

Chrom waved them all away with his hand. "I, too, am glad to be back. We have much to discuss, my friends," he said. We followed him into the mess hall, where there was enough space to accommodate all of us comfortably.

Chrom sat at the head of the table, next to Sumia. Frederick also insisted on sitting next to Chrom. I sat next to Lissa, who was overjoyed to see her brother again. On the other side of Lissa was Maribelle, who refused to sit anywhere other than at the princess' side. Next to Maribelle was Gaius, unexpectedly. He was sucking on a candy cane, and he gave me a wink when he saw me looking. Next to Gaius was Panne, who seemed oddly comfortable around the thief, at least compared to her attitude towards everyone else. Virion was sitting next to the taguel, occasionally sneaking glances at the exotic woman. Beside him was Sully, and next to Sully was Stahl. Those two had seemed almost inseparable, ever since I had first paired them up. Next to Stahl was Vaike, who sat beside Miriel. The two mages were sitting together, next to an empty seat that, on second glance, proved to be occupied by Kellam. After Kellam sat Donny, and next to him was, surprisingly enough, Cordelia, who had recovered since I had last seen her. The pegasus knight was sitting next to Phila, who was sitting beside Frederick. The only person unaccounted for was Lon'qu, although I was sure he would turn up at some point.

When everyone was seated, Chrom began. "My Shepherds, my warriors...there is work to be done. Gangrel must be stopped so that peace can once again reign in Ylisse. Will you help me?"

There was a storm of agreement from the Shepherds around the table.

"You can count me in!" Lissa exclaimed. "I'm tired of crying all the time. It's time to start punching stuff!" she added, with vicious glee.

"Hear hear, darling!" Maribelle concurred. "Our people have suffered enough."

"Gladly would I fight and die for House Ylisse!" Stahl said proudly.

Sully slammed the table with her mailed fist. "Gladly would I fight and *kill* those bastards for House Ylisse!" she roared.

"Teach is here and class is in session!" Vaike punched the air wildly.

"Your sister earned my respect. I shall champion her, as the last taguel."

Over the din, I thought I heard Kellam. "I'm with you, too! You know. Just in case anyone..." His

timid voice trailed off.

“You have the archest of archers on your side. Who could stop us?”

“You’re our hero, Chrom,” Ricken said. “We’d be honoured to fight for you.”

A gruff voice came from next to the wall. “You make a worthy leader. You have my sword.” Lon’qu did not approach the table, but he had definitely thrown his lot in with the Shepherds.

From next to Chrom, Sumia said, “I will be the unbreakable shield by your side!” Her voice was filled with determination.

“Your sister meant the world to me,” Phila said, “And now that she has left us, I swear my fealty to the Shepherds. My strength is yours, Prince Chrom. Use it as you will.”

At last, Frederick spoke, his voice filled with pride. “You have grown strong, milord. I may have set a poor example as a knight, but I swear to you, I shall die before any more exalted blood is spilled!”

Once the tumult of voices had died down, Chrom spoke again. “Thank you all. Truly. You honour me with your loyalty.” He stood up. “I will not falter again. We shall answer this outrage! The Mad King must be stopped!”

The resounding cheer that followed the prince’s words must have been heard all around Ylistol. Which is why I found it remarkable how a single voice could cut through the noise.

“How touching.”

We all turned to face the door, where a stranger dressed in a red tunic stood, leaning slightly against the doorframe. His skin was tanned, and he was smirking arrogantly at the Shepherds.

Frederick stood up. “Can we help you?”

“I think the question is, ‘Can *we* help *you*?’” The young man’s tone was even more arrogant than his smile.

“State your purpose,” Phila snapped.

The man nodded, pulling out a scroll from his pocket. He unfurled the scroll and said, “I bring a message from khans Flavia and Basilio of Regna Ferox. They offer their condolences at the recent death of the exalt, and wish to offer their support in this dark hour for the halidom. To that end, they are willing to combine their forces with your own, in order to combat the Plegian menace, as discussed during sire’s previous visit.” He walked over to the table, offering the scroll to Frederick, who took the parchment and scanned it efficiently. I noticed Lon’qu glaring daggers at the newcomer’s back.

“It appears,” Frederick said, “that the Feroxi are choosing to fully support our efforts in this war.” He passed the scroll to Chrom, who also read it.

“Very well,” Chrom said. “We agree to the terms as stated in this scroll. We will happily accept any additional troops that Regna Ferox has to offer. After all, we were planning on requesting more Feroxi soldiers, anyway.”

The messenger shifted from one foot to the other. “There’s one more condition, *sire*. The Khans wish to meet with you in person, in Ferox.”

“Really?” Chrom asked, perplexed. “Whatever for?”

“I’m just an ambassador, *sire*. I’m not privy to the inner details of the khans’ plans.” He smirked again.

“Chrom,” I said, “this may be to our advantage in the war. The Plegians are likely expecting a counter-attack from our border. They may not yet know of our alliance with Ferox. If we strike from the Feroxi-Plegian border, we may still hold the element of surprise.”

“Ah,” the newcomer crowed, “so *this* is the brilliant tactician I’ve heard so much about? The legends were true.”

The messenger’s words, his mocking smile and his face brought back familiar memories.

“Have we met before, perchance?” I asked him, experiencing an odd sense of *déjà vu*.

The messenger smirked. “I’m sure I’d remember meeting a fellow such as *you*, sir.” He winked.

Chrom walked over to him. “You may return to Ferox, Sir...?”

The man with tanned skin bowed. “Antonio, sire. And please, no need for that ‘sir’ business. I am but a humble ambassador, after all.”

Chrom studied the man’s face. “Indeed. Please deliver our message to the Khans. Tell them we will be honoured to accept their terms, and that we will travel to Ferox on the morrow.”

The man called Antonio bowed again. “Thy will be done.” He gave the table one last parting smirk, before turning on his heel and marching out the door, with a nod to Lon’qu as he passed the fellow Feroxi.

As soon as Antonio had passed through the door, hushed conversation began.

Lissa frowned. “What was with that guy?”

“*I’ll* say.” Maribelle sniffed. “No manners at all. He gives a very poor impression of his country.”

“Is something wrong, Robin?” I heard Chrom ask me.

“...I have to go,” I said hurriedly, and I left the table.

“Wait, Robin!” I heard him call, but it was too late. I followed the Feroxi ambassador out the door.

The man was fast, but I caught up to him in the streets of Ylissstol, on his way towards the Northroad. I called out, “Wait!” and he turned, with his characteristic smile.

“Well, the Ylissean tactician,” Antonio said. “This is a surprise.”

“We *have* met before,” I said firmly. “And more than once.”

“Oh, good,” he muttered, smile waning a little. “So you *do* remember.”

“I should thank you,” I said. “If it weren’t for you, I would never have realised that Ricken had followed us to the border. And before that, I saw you watching us in the arena in Ferox. And before *that*, we met you at the Longfort.”

“I’m impressed. Three out of three.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Like I said, I’m an ambassador from Regna Ferox. The khans sent me to inform you of their intention to integrate the two armies.”

“But what about the incident at the Plegian border? Did they send you there, too?”

Antonio folded his arms. “No, they didn’t. I have other obligations than to the khans.”

“Oh, really? Who else do you have ‘obligations’ to, then?”

His eyes glittered. “I won’t say here. Needless to say, I have my own reasons for keeping tabs on you, Robin.”

I frowned, and it made him laugh. “Don’t worry. I’m mostly harmless, me. And the khans are good people. But, of course, you knew that already.”

“I still don’t trust you,” I told him.

“That’s fine,” he said. “Nobody really does.”

And with that, he turned and left me standing there in the streets, alone. I sighed, and jogged back to the barracks. The others would be wondering where I had gone. I would need to come up with a good excuse.

Chapter 11

We arrived at the Feroxi capital less than two days after leaving Ylistol. Our journey to Regna Ferox was different from our previous one: mainly because we lacked the reassuring presence of Frederick. He had remained at the palace, along with Phila, at Chrom's insistence. If the Plegians attacked Ylistol while the Shepherds were elsewhere, the city would stand no chance against the invaders. Although reluctant to leave his charge for any length of time, Frederick agreed that the wisest course of action would be to leave the most experienced members of the Shepherds behind in the case of an emergency.

"Although, I must say," Chrom said to me, as we were marching along the Northroad, "this is the longest amount of time Frederick has spent away from either me or Lissa in years."

"He'll be alright," I said. "He has Phila to keep him company."

"I hope you're not implying what I think you are."

I only grinned in response.

When we reached the capital, we were escorted straight to Castle Ferox, where Chrom, Lissa and I then met with the khans.

"Prince Chrom!" Flavia exclaimed as we walked into the audience chamber. "It is good to see you again."

"The feeling is mutual, Khan Flavia."

"You have our sincerest condolences for your loss," the East-Khan said.

"Truly," Khan Basilio chimed in. "Exalt Emmeryn was as magnificent as she was beautiful. The halidom has lost a great leader."

"We in Ferox rarely see leaders who advocate peace over war," Flavia explained. "That is why your departed sister was such an intriguing person to us."

Khan Basilio put his hand over his heart and said, "I wish I could have seen more of her."

Flavia glared at him. "Oaf!" she cried. "Emmeryn was ten times the ruler you'll ever be!"

Basilio scratched the back of his neck. "It was a compliment," he muttered, then said to us, "You see what I get for being nice? 'Oaf', she calls me. She says it so often, you'd think she would know what it meant."

It was good seeing Flavia and Basilio again. The two khans of Ferox were like an old married couple, the way they bickered.

"Anyhow," Basilio said, "let's get down to business. I presume you want justice for what those Plegian bastards did to your sister, right?"

Chrom nodded, and Flavia's mouth split into a grin. "Then have *we* got an army for you! We have upwards of five thousand Feroxi soldiers willing to bring the fight to Gangrel."

"Will that be enough?" Chrom asked.

Basilio grimaced and said, “Well...our spies our reporting that the Plegian army has over fifteen thousand troops.”

Chrom groaned. “Damn that King Gangrel! He’s always one step ahead.”

“Hold on, Chrom,” I interrupted his cursing of the Mad King. “Remember what I said about the element of surprise? Not to mention the fact that most of the Plegian conscripts are poor, untrained fighters. The Feroxi soldiers we’re bringing to the fight are skilled warriors.”

Flavia thumped her chest in pride. “Damn right, they are! Those Plegian fiends are no match for our men!”

Chrom turned to me. “Do you really think we can do it?”

I nodded. “I have a plan in mind, but it’s a risky one.”

“As ever,” he muttered. “Let’s hear it, then.”

I felt the eyes of the khans watching me as I explained my plan.

“First off, Chrom, you’re not going to like this plan very much. It involves...waiting for the Plegians to invade Ylisse.”

Chrom’s eyes narrowed. “What?!”

“Think about it,” I said hurriedly. “If the bulk of the Plegian forces are concentrated in Ylisse, their strength will be drawn away from the capital. The Shepherds, assisted by the Feroxi warriors,” I added, with a nod to the khans, “will assault the Plegian castle. Once Gangrel’s been taken care of, the Plegians will have no reason to continue fighting, even in Ylisse.”

Khan Flavia looked at me quizzically. “Is that true? Will all of our problems really be over once Gangrel is cold in the grave?”

“Cut off the head and the serpent dies,” I said. “It’s a simple plan, really. From what I can gather, Gangrel has no heirs or blood relatives in line to ascend the throne. If Gangrel is killed, then another succession crisis will arise in Plegia. This will tear their nation asunder, and the common people will be too busy fighting each other to worry about fighting Ylisse. The war will be over.”

Basilio muttered, “That’s a sinister plan.”

I could see the disapproval in Chrom’s expression. “Is it really right to take advantage of a kingdom’s weakness like that?”

“Chrom,” I protested, “these are the people who *murdered* your sister! Even if I hadn’t mentioned the idea of a succession crisis, how would you feel about Gangrel?”

Chrom muttered, “I’d want to kill him. I’d want to do it myself.”

“You see?” I said. “Even you can see that killing Gangrel is the right thing to do. The man is a tyrant, Chrom. The people of Plegia obey him out of fear, not loyalty. Once he is dead and gone, the Plegians will have no reason to war with Ylisse.”

Chrom relented. “You may be right. But Emmeryn believed that the people of Plegia desire peace just as much as we do. Will killing Gangrel really give that peace to them?”

“Are you having second thoughts?” I asked him.

“However,” Chrom continued, “it may be that the violence that follows Gangrel’s demise will result in fewer casualties for the continent as a whole. As much as I’d like to avoid more violence, I believe that Robin’s plan is the path we should take.”

“Well said, boy,” Basilio boomed. “You’ve set this old man’s heart alight with pride. Let’s do it! Let’s kick those Plegians’ sorry arses so hard they’ll kiss the moon!”

“For once, I agree with the oaf,” Flavia said. “Let’s give those mongrels a war they’ll never forget!”

We marched south from the Feroxi capital a few days later, after we had all rested up from our previous journey. But now, it wasn’t just the Shepherds who were with me, we were backed up by Feroxi soldiers in their hundreds. I thought such a large number of grown men and women would be a rowdy bunch, and our journey to the Plegian border would be a lively one. Instead, the Feroxi warriors remained almost entirely silent as we marched.

“Is there something wrong with the men?” I asked Basilio, who was marching alongside me.

He laughed. “No, no, don’t worry. They’re always like this.” He turned to face the soldiers and bellowed at them, “Come on, you sad sacks, lighten up! We’re only going to war! Have a bit of cheer, for gods’ sakes!” He turned back, shaking his head. “I swear, they don’t know a good war when they see one. I should get Olivia to dance for them.”

I had met Olivia earlier that morning. She was a dancer, but she spent most of her time working in the infirmary as a part-time medic. Basilio told me that she was like a daughter to him. She was beautiful, but painfully shy and quiet, in total contrast to her adoptive father.

Basilio went on. “As Lon’qu has no doubt shown you by now, the best Feroxi warriors tend to be poor conversationalists as a rule.”

“I suppose you’re the exception to that rule, West-Khan?”

“Naturally. You don’t get to be a khan without saying a few sweet words. You’ve got to have *skills*, and not just on the battlefield, if you know what I mean.” He gave me a sly wink. “I tell ya, when I was your age, there wasn’t a dame in Ferox who wouldn’t-”

“Can I ask you something, Khan Basilio?” I was eager to move the conversation away from West-Khan’s...past experiences.

“Sure. As long as you drop that whole ‘khan’ business. We’re comrades-in-arms now, Robin. Just call me ‘Uncle Basilio’.” He chortled and squeezed my shoulder with one of his great, big hands.

“Er, right. So...Basilio, what do you know about the messenger you sent to us?”

He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “You mean Antonio?”

“That’s him. He said he was an ‘ambassador’.”

“Did he, now?” He let out another booming laugh. “That sounds like him, alright. He calls himself an ambassador, but he’s more like a spy.”

My head snapped up at the word. “A spy?”

“We Feroxi have to know what’s going on outside our borders, especially around wartime. Antonio’s one of our best.”

“Do you trust him?”

“I don’t usually trust spies,” Basilio admitted, “but Antonio’s a little different. He’s got charm. He reminds me of myself, when I was a lad...”

“He seemed a rough around the edges to me,” I muttered.

“Well,” Basilio grumbled, “I should say he’s got charm – for a Feroxi.” He chuckled, before asking, “So why the sudden interest in one of my men?”

I thought back to my conversation with Antonio in Ylissol. “No reason,” I replied evasively.

Basilio grinned. “Oho!” he cried. “I see his charms have ensnared you, too!”

“I-it’s not like that!” I said quickly.

But Basilio laughed even harder. “I’m joking, I’m just joking. Ah, young folk,” he said, with a hint of nostalgia.

We reached the Longfort, which stretched all the way along the southern border of Regna Ferox, before noon. We were allowed to pass through this time without any trouble, although once we had crossed the border Basilio announced that he had to go back inside the fortress.

“I’ll be back soon,” he called as he departed. “There’s something important waiting for us here.”

“What?” Chrom asked.

“It’s a surprise,” the khan said.

And so we hung around outside the Longfort, waiting for this ‘surprise’ to arrive. When it did, it was in the form of an entire convoy of carts and wagons, full of merchants and smiths, which passed through the Longfort and joined us on the Plegian side. The band of merchants turned out to be lead by a woman with long, red hair, who introduced herself to Chrom and the rest of us as Anna: the ‘Secret Seller’.

“These are my fellow merchants,” she said, gesturing at the convoy that was now trading with the few supply carts we had brought from Ylissol.

“Did Khan Basilio send you?” Chrom asked her.

“He sure did, handsome! The West-Khan figured you Shepherd folks might need some extra supplies, since you’re fighting in a war and all. He should be still inside the fort. He wants me to travel with you and offer my services. For a reasonable price, of course,” she winked.

“If it’s services you’re offering, you’d better talk to my tactician.” He turned around, looking for me, and calling me over when he saw me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m going to go find Basilio,” Chrom said. “You can deal with this ‘Secret Seller’.”

“So,” Anna said, once Chrom had left, “I hear you’re interested in hiring a merchant?”

“Er, I hadn’t really thought about it,” I said. “What’s the benefit in hiring a merchant if you still have to buy from them?”

“I can offer your troops a discount!” she exclaimed. “Not to mention that we Secret Sellers have contacts all over the continent. And I can also fend for myself, you know; I’m quite handy with a sword.”

“Hold on - Secret *Sellers*? Are there more of you?”

She placed a delicate finger over her lips. “It’s a secret.”

“You know we’re heading into war, right? Do you feel safe knowing that you’ll be getting involved?”

“Like I said, I can fend for myself. What do you think? Fancy taking me with you?”

I folded my arms in thought. “Well, Chrom doesn’t seem to mind. And, truthfully, we could use the help of the convoy. The Shepherds don’t have a personal convoy large enough to carry all of our supplies.”

“Then it’s a deal!” Anna shook my hand vigorously. “You’ll never make a loss with me in tow. I guarantee it!”

Chrom returned with Basilio a short while later, and we were on our way once again.

It wasn’t long before the dry, grassy plains of Northern Plegia gave way to arid sands. It was almost unnatural, the way the plants and soils just seemed to dry out as we travelled towards the heart of the kingdom. Although, knowing the Plegians’ affinity for Dark Magic, and the effects it had on the environment, it probably *was* unnatural.

I could tell the others were also feeling uneasy at the prospect of invading Plegia. We had only crossed the border a short while ago, and yet we were already a long way away from the snowy fields of Regna Ferox.

“Aren’t deserts supposed to be, I dunno, *hot*?” Lissa muttered as we marched over the sands. “It’s not much warmer here than it was back in Ferox.”

Maribelle gave her friend a sympathetic look. “If you like, darling, you may stand next to my horse. She will keep you warm.”

“Aw, thanks, Maribelle. But I’m okay.”

Chrom, on the other hand, was on edge. We had passed several desert villages built around oases so far, but none had raised any sort of alarm at seeing our army march past. No soldiers had come running, no signals had been sent as far we could tell. It all seemed a bit too easy...

“I’d like to believe it’s our cunning that got us this far without being spotted,” Chrom said, “but we’ve seen far too little of the Plegian Guard. Where are they? If Gangrel has a trap planned, he is in no hurry to spring it.”

“You should know better than to tempt fate,” I told him.

“You may be right,” he admitted.

Naturally, it was only a few minutes later that we caught sight of Sumia and Cordelia - our scouts who had been travelling further ahead – flying towards us with great speed.

“Destiny is a cruel mistress,” I muttered as the two pegasus knights landed nearby, and immediately ran over to Chrom.

“Chrom!” Sumia cried, being careful not to trip over her feet as she ran. “Er, I mean...Captain! We have urgent news!”

“Begging your pardon, milord, but we discovered an enemy camp lying in our path. There was some sort of disturbance there, but we couldn’t fly close enough to investigate further.” Cordelia’s face was bright red, and she even bowed low as she apologised.

Chrom smiled. “It’s alright, Cordelia. You and Sumia did your best.”

Cordelia turned an even-darker shade of scarlet while Chrom turned to Sumia and said, “Pass word to the others. Tell them to get ready to engage any possible foes we may encounter.”

“Aye, Captain,” Sumia said cheerily. With her help, and Cordelia’s, the news soon spread around the Shepherds and the Feroxi men that we would be having our first battle on Plegian soil. We marched on south, eventually passing over the crest of a sandy hill that revealed to us the enemy camp, right where Cordelia had said it would be.

But what we didn’t expect to see was a small, teenage girl with long, green hair, not dressed in the Plegian uniform colours of red and black, fleeing from a tall man with red hair. The two of them were running in our direction, with the man calling after the girl while she refused to listen, clearly agitated by the tall man’s pursuit of her.

“Get away!” I heard the girl cry out in distress. “Leave me *alone*!”

I also heard the man protest in a grizzly, accented voice. “You break Gregor’s heart! Why you treat like villain?”

I didn’t understand what the man was saying, but the other Shepherds were drawing their weapons, anticipating the arrival of the bizarre duo. I shrugged, and pulled out my sword from its sheath.

Chrom stepped forward, Falchion gleaming in the midday sun. “You there!” he cried. “Fiend! Keep your hands off that maiden!”

The red-haired man looked offended at Chrom’s words. “Who is fiend?” He pointed to his thug-like face. “You mean Gregor? No, friend! You have idea wrong!”

Lissa made a disgusted noise. “Yeah, right! Creep!”

The man shook his head. “This day has been nothing but insults and punches to groin. And all for doing good deed!”

I paused, lowering my weapon. “What are you...?” I began, but I stopped when I witnessed a group of Plegians charging outwards from the camp.

The man, who was referring to himself as ‘Gregor’, was oblivious to the oncoming soldiers. “Listen, friend,” he tried again, “Gregor only want to...”

One of the Plegian soldiers, dressed in robes that marked him out as a Dark Mage, cried out upon seeing the small girl, who by now had hidden herself behind Chrom's cape. Chrom, for his part, looked concerned rather than annoyed at the girl's position.

The Dark Mage, who had a bird-like visage and a nasty grin plastered on his face, shrieked, "There you are, you slippery scamp! Prepare for a dose of Grima's wrath!"

Grima... Once again, the name of the Fell Dragon stirred strange feelings within me, feelings that I swallowed down and instead asked, "Chrom, what should we do? We could be getting in over our heads, here."

Chrom looked from the Dark Mage and his followers to the red-haired man. "Why are you all after the girl?"

Gregor spluttered in shock. "All? What is this 'all'? Gregor is not one of 'all'! Gregor is not enemy! You must believe!"

The Dark Mage had fallen back, and was now ordering his troops to attack us. Chrom made a quick decision. "We'll sort this man out later. Right now, we need to protect the girl."

The poor girl peeped out from behind Chrom, her eyes wide and pleading. "You're going to help me?"

"We'll do everything in our power to keep you safe. We'll drive these cursed dogs off!"

He pointed Falchion high into the air, directing us to attack.

We immediately encountered a problem: our movements in battle, especially that of the cavaliers, were hindered greatly by the sand. Fortunately, our mages and pegasus knights were unaffected, and could move about the battlefield with ease. To that end, I formulated a quick strategy.

"Miriel and Ricken," I called to the two mages, "I want you two to take the front lines."

Ricken gasped. "B-but, we're not wearing armour or anything! Other than these robes, at least."

"Indeed." The woman pushed up the bridge of her glasses. "Is it truly a wise strategy to have us mages fight in such close proximity to our foes?"

"Look at their forces." I directed their attention to the robed Plegians that were marching towards us. "Their men are nearly all Dark Mages. Magical attacks hurt no matter how much armour you're wearing. In fact, wearing *less* armour will help you here, because you'll be able to move faster and avoid their spells. And as mages yourselves, you have plenty of experience with handling other magic users, right?"

Ricken shuffled from one foot to the other nervously. "I suppose you *are* the tactician."

"I want you two to stick together," I told them. "You're more powerful as a pair than working solo."

"Understood." Miriel nodded, and Ricken reluctantly followed after her. I had to believe that they would be okay.

I told Sully and Stahl to stay back from the fight, as they would only get injured by the dark spells being thrown around the battlefield. Sully looked frustrated at not being allowed to fight, but Stahl placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she seemed to calm down. Those two were closer than even I had imagined.

Since Lissa was also a magic-user, she would be able to clear the way for others. But, as much as she denied it, she was delicate and unable to defend herself. I would need to give her a skilled partner, possibly one she was already familiar with. But Frederick was all the way back in Ylistol...

“Lon’qu!” I cried out for the myrmidon, whom I noticed standing aloofly nearby. “I need you to stay with Lissa.”

The warrior blanched, and I hurriedly said, “She can heal you if you’re injured, and you can protect her from the Plegians. We don’t have time to argue. It’s for the best.”

The Feroxi man’s eyes narrowed, but he did as he was ordered.

“What ‘bout me, Robin?”

I turned to see Donnel standing alone, with his spear in hand, ready for battle. I winced internally. I had completely forgotten about the farm boy. He was too weak to fight in the frontlines of a battle like this, as much as I hated to admit it.

Suddenly, I had an idea. “You see that girl there?” I pointed to the green-haired girl, who was sitting alone nearby, still looking rather frightened.

“Uh-huh.”

“I want you to protect her. Keep her away from any danger, and don’t let her out of your sight, alright?”

The boy nodded. “Sure thing, Robin! I won’t letcha down!” He ran off to join the girl, who looked happy to have a new playmate.

The battle progressed quickly, partly due to the intervention of the surprisingly-skilled Gregor, who cut down the enemy left and right with great proficiency. Soon, there was only one Plegian left standing: the Dark Mage with the bird-like face, who was screaming curses at the Shepherds as he fired spell after spell from his tome.

I heard Chrom growl, “Tenacious bastard,” as he was forced back again by the enemy’s magic.

The enemy mage cackled as he fled from our attacks. “You’ll never defeat me, you foolish heathens! Death to all who oppose Grima!”

I realised with a lurch that the strange man was running straight towards the young girl, who was facing away from the oncoming danger.

But Donnel saw it in time, and he aimed his spear at the Dark Mage. “I ain’t lettin’ you put one finger on Nowi!” he cried.

The man cackled again, and swept the skinny boy aside with a single hand that glistened with dark power. Donnel was thrown backwards and he crashed into a nearby sand dune.

I ran over to help, but I was too late. The Dark Mage grabbed the young girl, who was apparently named Nowi, by the arm. She squealed and struggled against her captor’s hold.

“It’s no use!” he cried. “You’ll never escape from me now!”

Just then, Nowi pulled out a red stone that she had been concealing in her pocket, and she screamed, “Get away from me!” in a voice that seemed unnaturally loud for such a small girl.

Before my eyes, Nowi began to glow brilliantly, until she became too bright to look at. I shielded my eyes, and when I let my hand drop, the Dark Mage was standing before a glowing, green dragon with glittering scales and a massive maw.

I couldn't believe it: a *manakete*? I had thought they were only a legend, or at least long extinct. To find one *here*, of all places...

I saw the dragon that was once Nowi inhale deeply, then spit the breath back out as a burst of brilliant, green flame that struck the Dark Mage and sent him sprawling backwards. Amazingly, the bastard was still alive, and he clambered to his feet with new greed flaring in his eyes.

"I knew you would make a fitting sacrifice for the Fell Dragon," he hissed. "Now, prepare to become one with Grima!" He whispered a dark incantation as he read from his tome.

Nowi moved to attack again but, like me, she was surprised when the point of a spear burst out of the man's chest.

"Lord...Grima..." he gurgled, and he collapsed to the ground, revealing a stunned-looking Donnel standing behind him.

"I done it!" the boy cried, blissfully ignorant of the shocked looks on all of our faces. He retrieved his spear from the dead man's back and walked over to Nowi, who had returned to her human form.

"Are ya okay, Nowi?" he asked.

The dragon-girl nodded shakily, rubbing her eyes and Gregor came over to comfort the girl.

"Ho now, wee one!" he said gently. "Do not make with the crying of tears. The evil people are now *dead* people. This is good, no?"

Nowi looked up at the man, who had helped her escape the Plegians, with new courage. "You... You're right. Th-thank you...and I'm sorry I was so mean to you earlier. I just get nervous around people who are...outside my age group."

Gregor chortled. "Your age group? Gregor much closer to your age than others here!"

Meanwhile, the other Shepherds were recovering from the battle. Conversation broke out in the wake of the violence. Chrom joined me as we walked over to where Nowi, Gregor and Donnel were.

"Say, er...Gregor, was it? Do you mind looking after the girl? We need to press on."

Gregor folded his arms as he considered his options. "Gregor is mercenary, yes? Maybe you *hire* Gregor instead. True, Gregor just finish killing former employers, but still very reliable! So long as you not try to hurt little girl, Gregor will not hurt you. Also, Gregor need steady income: *many* angry former employers."

"You mean you're a sellsword?" I asked.

Gregor grinned proudly. "Yes! *Very* swell sword! Cost performance very high. You have Gregor's word."

I looked to Chrom, who shrugged and said, "Sure, why not? You're hired."

Nowi pouted from beside the tall mercenary. "B-but what about me?! I *won't* go back on the

auction block!”

Donnel gaped. “You were bein’ *sold*, Nowi?”

She nodded glumly. “To men more despicable than you can possibly imagine. They made me transform for them, they drank, laughed and made me do tricks...”

The boy scowled. “What kinda sick fella buys and sells a pretty little girl like Nowi, here? Even if she *can* turn into a dragon...”

I muttered, “I don’t know how to tell you this, Donny, but Nowi might not be as young as you think. She’s a manakete, after all. They tend to live for a very long time, or so they say.”

“Really?” Donny approached the girl curiously. “How old are ya?”

Nowi started to count on her fingers, then abruptly gave up. “About a thousand...something...”

“A-a thousand?!” Donny’s face went white with shock.

“But look,” Nowi cried, “no wrinkles!” She giggled, and Donny couldn’t help but join in. Even Gregor let himself have a chuckle.

I turned to Chrom and said, “The dragonkin are said to be more resilient than us humans. Nowi could be a strong ally.”

Chrom nodded. “You might be right. Besides, we can’t risk her falling back into the hands of the Grimleal.”

My heart leaped into my mouth at the familiar word. “Th-the Grimleal?” I repeated, trying to keep my voice even.

Chrom had a deep frown on his face as he explained to me, “They’re followers of the Fell Dragon, Grima. The very same dragon the first exalt defeated a thousand years ago.” He glanced briefly at the fallen Dark Mage. “Even today, there are those who yearn for the monster’s return.”

So, that’s the background I was born into? No wonder just hearing the name ‘Grima’ sent such a chill down my spine.

I tried to hide my uneasiness, and I said, “Shall we head off again? I don’t think there’s anything left for us here.”

“I agree, Robin. We need to make tracks if we want to reach the Plegian capital.”

I glanced over at our companions: an old mercenary with a strange accent and a farm boy playing with a girl that could turn into a dragon. I grumbled, “I think I’ve had enough bizarreness for one day.”

Chrom laughed. “We Shepherds *do* seem to attract the oddest of folks, don’t we? I suppose it’s a bit more interesting this way,” he mused

“Speaking of interest...” I muttered as Sumia wandered over to her captain. I decided to leave before I became the third wheel. I glanced around the open area we were occupying, studying the Shepherds and some of the Feroxi, too. To my surprise, Lissa and Lon’qu were still together, with Lissa chatting away to the stoic myrmidon. If Lon’qu was anything, he was diligent. Miriel and Ricken were also talking, quite animatedly, too. Looking around, I saw plenty of smiling, happy faces. Even in wartime, the strength of camaraderie shone through. I was glad to be a part of the

Shepherds, but at times like this, I still felt like an outsider. I wondered why this feeling pervaded my thoughts.

“It’s because you haven’t told Chrom or the others about your true home.”

“Plegia is not my home,” I growled, irritated at this cynical side of my mind.

“It doesn’t matter what you think. The damage is already done. You’ll never be one of them; you’re nothing but a foreigner.”

“Shut up!” I clutched my head, willing this strange voice that lurked inside me to be silent. But all the while, I could hear its malicious laughter pounding in waves through my skull.

“That’s all you are – a foreigner...”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Over the next few days, we were constantly on the lookout for any more Plegian forces that may have tried to attack. Fortunately for us, it didn't seem as though the Grimleal that we had fought had managed to send word of our coming to any other local battalions stationed around the desert. On the downside, our path to the capital was hindered by the presence of barracks and garrisons that populated the otherwise-barren deserts. What should have been a few days' trip ended up taking close to a fortnight overall. During that time, we encountered several roaming squadrons of Plegian soldiers that we dispatched as quickly as possible. I was forced to make amendments and annotations to my series of maps that were stored away in my tent.

And so one morning, four days after leaving Regna Ferox, I was poring over my maps and various scrolls, as usual. It was warm in the desert, much warmer than it had been near the border, and I had taken to wearing my cloak over my bare torso to stay cool. But, possibly because of my ethnicity, I acclimatised to the heat of the desert far too quickly for my liking. I was worried that the other Shepherds would notice my relatively-comfortable state.

I yawned and stretched, leaning back on my wooden chair, and almost falling off in surprise when I saw Chrom standing in the tent's entrance behind me. He had forgone his usual garments and cape in favour of a simple tunic that left his arms and shoulders bare.

"H-how long have you been there?" I asked him.

He couldn't help smiling at my over-the-top reaction. "Don't worry. I just came in."

"Well, you could have at least *coughed*, or something!" I rubbed my eyes, which were bleary from having been staring relentlessly at maps for the past few hours. "Anyway, what's going on?"

"The other Shepherds are training around the camp," he said, sticking his thumb over his shoulder. "I was going to ask if you would come spar with me?"

"With *you*?" I was surprised. "You're a much better swordsman than me, Chrom. Surely there's a better candidate? Lon'qu, maybe?"

"I've sparred with Lon'qu more times than I can count. And I only met him a few weeks ago! And yet, you haven't even gone a single round with me."

"There's a good reason for that," I remarked.

"You're not *afraid*, are you?"

"Yes," I replied immediately. "The first time I ever saw you, Chrom, you were ruthlessly cutting down brigands without breaking a sweat. How could someone like *me* stand up against you?" I gestured to my bared chest and abdomen, both flat and unimpressive.

"You'll never get better if you don't practise," he told me.

I sighed. "Fine. But, are you sure you want to be responsible for the death of your own tactician?"

He laughed, before adding in a gentler voice, "I'll go easy on you. I promise."

I made a face. "I suppose being patronised is better than being grievously injured. Marginally."

Chrom laughed again, and I joined in as we left the tent together.

The camp was filled with shouts and grunts of Shepherds and other soldiers training. It was, admittedly, an inspiring sight to see them all working so hard. I saw Sully and Stahl, training together as always. Virion was using a wooden shield, propped up against a tent, for target practise. I hoped it was his own tent. Donnel was repeatedly spearing a straw dummy while Nowi watched with interest. And Vaike had apparently challenged Basilio to a sparring match, for the two axe-wielders were duelling near the centre of the camp, amidst a group of spectators, including several Feroxi soldiers. I was expecting such a battle to be rather one-sided, but Vaike was performing surprisingly well. Indeed, it was the young warrior who was most often on the offensive: Basilio was slowly being forced backwards with the strength of Vaike's blows.

"Are you ready, Robin?" I heard Chrom's voice call me, as if from far away. I turned to see him holding two wooden practise swords. I nodded, and he tossed one of them to me. I caught it by the handle before immediately assuming a combat stance. Chrom did the same, raising his sword to the level of his shoulder in a manner that I had seen him perform countless times before. I presumed it was a traditional Ylislean combat style: one that looked flashy and elegant, but was also powerful and quite skilful. It contrasted heavily with my own style, in which I held both my sword and my free hand out in front of me. It was not elegant *or* flashy, but it offered me more protection during battle. Protection that I sorely needed.

Chrom struck first, sprinting towards me faster than I had expected. I managed to bring my sword up to parry the blow, but his second strike caught me by surprise, jabbing me under my arm. I winced, and he backed off.

"I thought you said you were going to go easy on me?" I muttered, rubbing my side where the sword had poked me.

"I *am* going easy on you," he told me, with a barely-suppressed grin. "If this were a real battle, you'd be dead by now."

I grumbled as I readied myself for the next round. When he came towards me again, instead of blocking his strike, I leaped away from his sword. Chrom was still in the middle of his swing when I struck, lashing out with my own sword. I was shocked to hear the *clack* of wood meeting wood: Chrom had managed to parry my swift strike, and was now preparing to attack again. I brought my sword up to defend myself, but his move had been a feint. I grunted and doubled over as Chrom jabbed my exposed abdomen with his sword.

"Bastard," I hissed.

Chrom shrugged as he moved back once again. This time, it was me who struck first as I ran towards the exalt with my sword raised. He brought his sword up to effortlessly block the blow, but I delivered a swift kick to his stomach that knocked the wind out of him. I brought my sword up against his neck before he could recover.

"Yield," I ordered him.

"Fine," he said, shaking his head in exasperation as I moved back to my starting position again. "You fight dirty," he remarked. "This was supposed to be just a friendly duel."

"You never said anything about fighting fair," I pointed out. "If that's what it takes to even the playing field, I'll do what I must."

“You’re a pragmatist,” he observed.

“I’m a *tactician*,” I corrected him, as I retook my stance.

“You certainly are.” He attacked.

The matches were more even after that. Chrom still fought as he had done before, but I took whatever opportunity I could to fight back. I grabbed his sword by the blade, shoved him away and even struck below the belt. I felt bad fighting so crudely against my friend, but I also had my pride to consider. Where was the fun in being beaten over and over again, in front of the other Shepherds? I needed to look strong, or at least capable. The problem was that Chrom, being such a skilled warrior, rarely left himself open to such opportunities of attack. Even with my dirty tactics, we were closely matched.

After a few minutes, Chrom let his sword drop. “We’ll take a break,” he told me. He reached down to the bottom of his tunic, and he pulled it up over his head. His bare shoulders were rising and falling with his breath, and I could see the sweat on his face and body. The heat of the midday sun was affecting him badly, while I was still perfectly comfortable in my thick cloak.

No sooner had Chrom finished taken the tunic off than a roar went up from the centre of camp. I looked over to see the crowd dissipating, revealing Vaike lying on the dusty ground, his wooden axe in pieces beside him. Basilio stood over him, wielding his own wooden axe and looking somewhat concerned.

“Are you alright, boy?” the West-Khan spoke.

Vaike nodded. “The Vaike’ll live. You’re not bad for an old man.”

“And you’re pretty good, for a little punk!” Basilio laughed, stopping short when he caught a glimpse of Vaike’s chest. “You’ve got a nasty wound there, boy.”

Sure enough, from where I stood, I could see blood leaking out of a large gash in Vaike’s bare chest. Had Basilio done that? With a wooden axe? I marvelled at the man’s strength. It was no wonder that he had become a khan.

“Aw, you mean this?” Vaike dismissed the tall man’s concerns with a wave of his hand. “Nothin’ but a scratch to the Vaike!” He tried to get to his feet, but I could see the pain etched on his face.

Basilio held one massive arm out in front of him. “Hold on, there, boy. You’re not going anywhere until we get you patched up.” He straightened up, looking around him. “Is there a medic nearby?” he called out.

There was a flash of red hair as Cordelia appeared with a vial in her hand. “Pardon me,” she said, “but I’ve been trained in the application of vulneraries.”

“Perfect,” Basilio said.

Vaike blinked as Cordelia knelt down next to him. “Hey, Cordelia. How are you doin’?”

“Don’t move,” she ordered him, as she poured the vulnerary onto his wound. “This may sting a bit.”

“Hah, the Vaike’s not afraid of a little pain!”

She began massaging the liquid into his wound, with a look of intense concentration on her face. Vaike fell silent, mesmerised by her beauty. Before long, it was over. Cordelia stood, offering a

hand to Vaike. He took it, and got to his feet. I could see the wound on his chest had closed over. Vaike stared deeply into the pegasus knight's eyes.

"Thanks," he said.

She smiled. "Oh, it was nothing. Anyone would have done the same."

Just then, Chrom appeared on the scene. "Are you alright, Vaike?"

I winced as the tender moment was lost. Cordelia's face turned the same colour as her hair, while Vaike tried not to scowl at his friend's poor sense of timing.

"Captain!" Cordelia squeaked, dragging her eyes from Chrom's exposed torso. "I...I don't...I should go!" She turned and fled, without looking back.

"Is something the matter?" Chrom asked.

Vaike's eye twitched. "Everything's fine. Just fine." He, too, turned away from Chrom and walked off.

Chrom blinked, before walking back over to me. I shook my head wearily at his cluelessness.

"Ready for round two?" he asked me. I grunted in response.

We carried on like that for the next few hours. By the time we were finished, my arms ached from holding the practise sword up for so long. My sides and abdomen were sore from constantly being struck. Chrom's body was drenched with sweat and not even I could stop perspiring in the heat.

"That's...enough for today," Chrom panted. "You can...you can rest. You did well, Robin. Even...even if your methods were a bit unorthodox."

"Thank you...Chrom..." I wheezed.

He straightened up and said, "I'm...off to the bathing tent. You coming?"

"You go on...ahead," I told him. "I'll follow you in...later."

"Whatever you say." He wandered off to the bathing tent, leaving me alone.

During the practise session with Chrom, I had also been scanning the campsite, watching the other Shepherds train. One man in particular had caught my eye. He was training alone, practising some unique types of forms with his sword. There he had stood for the last hour or so, training diligently. I went over to him then. After a few moments, he let his sword drop and he glared at me.

"I cannot focus with you leering at me," Lon'qu said.

"Sorry, Lon'qu," I said meekly. "I just got caught up watching you practice. Your style is a perfect blend of accuracy, power and speed. They really know what they're doing up in Regna Ferox."

He grunted. "Strength is everything out there. Weakness is weeded out and eliminated."

“Would you mind teaching me a few moves?” I asked.

He looked me up and down curiously. “I am no teacher,” he said. “Besides, you are of Ylisse. The knights of your people have their own style. Isn’t that why you were sparring with Chrom?”

“Well, yes. But I was thinking: with the two styles being so different, why not learn what both can offer? It’s possible a mix of the two would be stronger than either one alone.”

Lon’qu frowned, deep in thought. “A naïve thought...but not impossible.” He turned to face me, with his blade drawn. “Very well. Draw your sword.”

I took a step backwards in surprise. “Wait, we’re jumping right into sparring?”

“I told you,” he said, “I am no teacher. You will have to learn for yourself. Come! Show me how a man of Ylisse fights! You will not be the only one to learn here.”

I shrugged. *So much for that bath*, I thought, as we clashed.

By the time I finally staggered into the bathing tent, I was well and truly exhausted. Chrom was just getting ready to leave, pulling on his smallclothes as I entered.

“Robin? What took you so long?”

“I got held up,” I muttered, as I began stripping off. “I went for an extra practise session with Lon’qu.”

“Careful,” he warned me. “We don’t want our star tactician getting tired out before the war can even truly begin.”

“I’ll be fine, Chrom. Could you pass me that towel?”

He did so, and I wrapped it around my waist. I wandered over to the bathtubs, dropping the towel and slipping into one of the tubs just as Chrom departed with a, “See you, Robin.” I sank down into the warm water, and relaxed.

“What a day,” I groaned.

“Oy, Gregor is hearing you.”

I yelped, whirling around in the tub for the source of the voice. To my surprise, I discovered Gregor lazing and grinning in a nearby bathtub.

“Hah! Why you look so afraid? Is Gregor really so scary to you young folk?”

“No, no, it’s not that. I just thought I was alone in here, that’s all.”

“Hmm? Is Gregor becoming the man who is easy to miss? Maybe you no see his muscles?” He began to stand up, but I waved my arms at him.

“That’s okay!” I said quickly. “It’s my fault I didn’t see you. I wasn’t paying attention, I suppose.”

“Is no big deal,” Gregor said, sitting back down again. “Gregor sees how tense young Robin is. Like he has weight of world on his shoulders, yes?”

“That’s what war does to a man,” I said. “Especially for a tactician.”

“We swell swords do not have the easy time, either! Gregor is losing count of grey hairs.”

“You’re right,” I told him. “I didn’t mean to seem selfish.”

“Gregor is understanding your meaning. He is also glad you is understanding Gregor! Some of the other ones here, they do be giving Gregor the time of roughness for his words and husky accent. Little girl with umbrella and ribbons in hair, she say that Gregor is ‘boorish and uncouth’.”

“That’ll be Maribelle. She’s like that with everyone. Don’t worry.”

“And what about rabbit-lady? Gregor say she look like fluffy bunny and she threaten to make with the hurting of poor Gregor.”

“That’s Panne. She’s...difficult. Doesn’t trust us humans.”

“Words hurt Gregor more than stones and sticks. He is caring soul, yes?”

“I’m sure he...*you* are.” I was beginning to find it hard to keep track of Gregor’s heavily-accented words.

“Heh. Robin is also caring soul. Gregor see why Robin is trusted leader.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Gregor.”

“Is no problem. Gregor, he is meeting many caring souls since he join this army. Blue-haired boy who was in here before Robin, he is Chrom, yes?”

“Yeah, that was Chrom.”

“Chrom is wise leader, but he is knowing little about the ways of womenfolk. So Gregor is teaching him all he knows about romance.”

I grinned. “Oh, really?”

“Indeed. Gregor is as experienced in the ways of love and passion as he is in stabbing the bad men. Chrom is fast-learner, but still beginner.”

“So what did you tell him?” I asked, filled with curiosity.

The mercenary tapped his nose conspiratorially. “Is secret. Unless Robin is giving Gregor some gold?”

“I have gold,” I admitted, “but it’s not mine to spend on such trivial...wait a minute. Did Chrom *pay* you to teach him these things?”

Gregor chortled good-naturedly. “No, Robin, Gregor is giving lessons to Chrom from top of house. No charge! He has much to be learning, you see. But Robin, Gregor thinks, is the dog of slyness. He is knowing more about people than he is saying.”

Damn. “...I think I might have underestimated you, Gregor.”

“Many people are underestimating Gregor and his muscled brain. And his brainy muscles. But Gregor must go now. Water is getting cold and Gregor is having the wrinkles on his fingers.”

There was the sound of splashing water as Gregor stood up and stepped out of his tub. He walked past me, with a towel mercifully wrapped around his waist.

“Now...where is Gregor leaving his breeches?”

“You left them beside the entrance,” a voice called out.

“Ah, yes! Many thanks, mysterious voice.” Gregor left with his clothes in hand as I gaped.

I searched the interior of the tent for the source of the disembodied voice. It took several sweeps of the room before I saw Kellam’s head peeping out over the side of a tub that stood in the corner.

“Hello, Robin.”

I choked. “K-Kellam?! How...when did...?”

“Me? I’ve been here the whole time.”

“You could have said something!” I spluttered.

“I didn’t want to interrupt the conversation. I just wanted to take a bath.”

“When did you arrive?” I asked him.

“Well, it was a little while ago. Chrom and Gregor were talking about sharing a bed with a woman, and so I-”

“That’s alright!” I squeaked, before swallowing deeply and carrying on in an even voice. “I don’t need to hear the details.”

“Sorry.”

The tent fell silent again, except for the growing number of voices outside. I frowned. Most of the Shepherds were by now finishing up their training regimens for the day. Soon enough, the bathing tent would become flooded with men looking for a bath. The last thing I needed when I was trying to relax was a horde of sweaty, stinking warriors barging in on me.

“Kellam,” I said quietly, “maybe we should...”

I was interrupted by the opening of the tent flap and the arrival of Vaike, Stahl, Donnel, Lon’qu and even Basilio. Their loud voices filled the tent, calling out to me when they noticed me in my tub.

“Hey, Robin!”

“Howdy, there!”

“Good evening!”

They immediately all began disrobing, tossing their discarded clothes left and right. What had been a nearly-empty tent only moments ago was now full to the brim. I doubted there were even enough clean towels to go around. The chaos began when Vaike leaped into a tub only to find Kellam already occupying it. Their shouts of shock and horror, coupled with Basilio’s booming laugh pierced my skull and gave me a headache.

I groaned. It was going to be a long evening...

Chapter End Notes

Oy, Gregor is fun man to be writing the dialogue for, yes?

Chapter 13

It had been over a week since we had left Regna Ferox. From my maps and sources, I deduced that we were roughly halfway between the border and the capital. It seemed that the desert sands were reducing our efficiency more than I had predicted. It didn't help that night fell quickly in the deserts of Plegia, prompting us to set up camp much earlier than normal.

After so much time spent in enemy territory, Chrom was getting edgy, and so was I; it was difficult enough to hide a force this size when we were mobile, but when we were stopped to rest? We had Feroxi sentries posted around the outskirts of the camp, but I wasn't certain that it would be enough. If the Plegians attacked during the night, would the Shepherds awaken and prepare for battle fast enough to avoid being slaughtered? And the feelings of isolation that had haunted me recently made my stomach churn and my head ache.

These thoughts, and more, kept me awake during that dark night in Plegia. If Chrom had been with me, he would have told me to sleep while I could. A tactician needs his rest, after all. Especially one in charge of an army so large. But no matter how I tossed and turned and pulled at the sheets in my tent, I could not get even a moment of sleep.

Eventually, long after midnight had passed, I threw off my covers and pulled on my cloak over my bare torso. I set out into the dark night, with the silence of the camp surrounding me. I passed tent after tent, occasionally hearing a brief snore or two. I noticed the familiar exterior of Anna's tent, filled with her cargo and other various items of value. The 'Secret Seller' had apparently become a member of the Shepherds herself, albeit one with other obligations.

It was eerie - being awake and surrounded by sleepers. As if my feelings of isolation needed any more nurturing.

I wandered past Chrom's tent, and I paused. *Should I check in to see how he's doing?* He was probably under more stress than I was, being the leader of this army. To have to go through all this so soon after the death of his sister. This was *his* war, more than anyone else's.

I started towards the tent entrance, before hesitating. If he was asleep, he might not appreciate being woken-up. He needed sleep just as much as I did, after all. But to my surprise, as I stood in front of the tent, out stepped none other than Chrom himself.

His eyes widened when he saw me. "Robin?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

He sighed. "...Can't sleep?"

I smiled wryly. "You know me too well. What about you?"

"I've...had a lot on my mind," he admitted.

"Well, that makes two of us."

He grinned. "You coming for a walk? Just around the camp, I mean."

"That'd be nice," I said, "but...maybe you could put some clothes on first?"

Chrom frowned as he looked downwards, then slapped his hand against his forehead. "Right. That might be a good idea."

I turned away from him, averting my gaze as he returned to his tent. There was the sound of shifting fabric, and Chrom re-emerged from his tent, having donned a pair of breeches.

“Sorry you had to see that, Robin,” he muttered shamefully.

“It’s not that *I* mind,” I said drily, “but what would the others think if they saw their fearless leader prancing around the camp, naked as the day he was born?”

He folded his arms over his bare chest. “You think I should’ve gone looking for a shirt, too?”

“It doesn’t really matter. The only people awake at this hour are the Feroxi soldiers keeping watch.” I raised an eyebrow. “Unless I woke Sumia up?”

Chrom shook his head. “Don’t worry – she’s still fast asleep.”

I grinned, and Chrom groaned as he realised his mistake. “You’re a sly bastard, Robin. I knew I made you a tactician for a reason, but for the life of me I couldn’t remember why.”

“It’s because I always remember to put some clothes on when I leave my tent.”

He laughed and I joined in, until a shushing noise came from a nearby tent.

And so Chrom joined me on my night-time stroll around the camp. We passed various tents, with not a sound piercing the silence of the night other than the noise of our footsteps and the occasional *caw* of a raven, searching the night for its prey.

“Is everything alright?” Chrom asked me. “You seem troubled.”

I dismissed his accusations with a wave of my hand. “It’s nothing serious. I was just thinking about the war, and the way everything has gone since it started. I suppose I never really realised how much work being a tactician entailed.”

“It won’t always be like this,” Chrom promised. “Once the war is over, everything will go back to the way it was before.” His words sounded hollow, and he clearly realised it. “I’m sorry. That’s not true. We both know it isn’t. Once the war ends, there’ll be a clamour for me to take the throne as the new exalt. There will be a coronation, and a big ceremony. *Everything* is going to change.”

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing, is it?”

But his face was solemn. “I don’t know what the future holds, Robin. No one does. But I won’t let someone else take the Shepherds away from me. These people are my friends. My family. My home.”

The guilt I felt at my recurring silence grew heavier on my conscience. What was I so afraid of? I could trust Chrom, couldn’t I?

“...” I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

I was a coward. I wouldn’t be able to bear having my friend, my first and closest friend, look at me the same way he looked at those Plegian brigands on the night he had rescued me.

“Did you say something, Robin?” He gave me a quizzical look.

I shook my head.

We walked in silence for a while, until I eventually breached another sensitive topic. “How are

you feeling? You know, with Emmeryn gone?”

His face fell, and I felt bad for bringing up those painful memories.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” I muttered.

Chrom shook his head. “It’s fine, Robin. You have a right to know how I feel.” He took a deep breath. “It’s tough. It really is. I was only the heir to the throne of Ylisse because I was Emmeryn’s brother. If she ever had children of her own, they’d inherit the royal bloodline. What I’m trying to say is...I didn’t ever think that she was going to die and leave me with...” He gestured around him, “All this. But I’m not bitter. This is my war just as much as it was Emm’s. And we can use the result of this war to further the peace between our nation and Plegia. But...” His voice faltered, and I looked at him. He was staring back at me, his eyes filled with sorrow.

“I can’t believe she’s gone, Robin. I know you only knew Emm for a short time, but she meant the world to Lissa, to her subjects...and to me. She had such a great future ahead of her, filled with promise and with love.” He clenched his fist. “But that bastard King Gangrel took it all away from her. Any hope we had for peace was quashed the moment Emm died.”

“That’s not true, Chrom. You are so much better than you know - as a leader and as a person. The hopes of the halidom rest on you now, but I know you can pull through. There will be peace, Chrom. I won’t rest until I see your dream fulfilled.”

Chrom smiled. “You’re a good friend, Robin. I’m glad I met you, whatever happens tomorrow, or all the days after.” We stared at each other for a moment longer, and then he spread his arms out. “Come here.”

I took a step back. “What are you saying, Chrom?”

“I’m saying ‘come here’.”

I spluttered. “B-but it’s the middle of the night and it’s dark out and neither of us are wearing shirts and-”

“Gods dammit, Robin, I said ‘come here’!”

He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I sighed, and returned the expression. We didn’t stay like that for long, but I appreciated the sentiment all the same.

As we stepped apart, I said, “I wonder what Sumia would say if she could see us now?”

Chrom’s eyes glazed over, before he frowned and said, “Robin...I think I’m in love with her.”

“Well, it took you long enough to realise it,” I muttered.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. It’s not like it came as a surprise.”

Chrom stared at me. “You mean you knew?”

I looked back at him, exasperated. “Chrom, the whole *army* knew. Any time you two were together, you were making doe-eyes at each other.”

Even in the near-darkness, I could see Chrom’s face flush. “W-we weren’t *that* bad, were we?”

I shook my head sadly. “I can’t believe you never realised. Lissa and Vaike were dropping hints

left and right.”

“I guess...it just took me this long to notice that she felt the same. All this time, Sumia has been there for me. She was always there to comfort me, and after Emm died-”

“It’s okay,” I interrupted him, “I don’t want to hear the details on how she ‘comforted’ you. But, I mean, you really are oblivious to all this sort of thing, aren’t you? I suppose you think Sully and Stahl are *just friends*?”

“Well, of course...” He blinked. “Sully and Stahl are more than friends?”

I sighed in frustration. “Yes! How dense can you get?!”

“Robin...”

“I mean, you could practically see it from *Valm*!”

“Robin!” Chrom hissed, and I fell silent. He pointed to a dark shape on the ground ahead of us. “What’s that?”

Nearby, a raven cawed.

We approached the shape, and in the semi-darkness, we could just about make out the face of a Feroxi soldier, eyes closed, lying cold on the ground.

Chrom bent down, examining the man, and then pronounced, “He’s not dead, just sleeping.”

Sure enough, I could see the sentry’s chest rising and falling in his slumber.

“At his post? I would’ve thought Feroxi warriors were more competent than this.”

“So would I,” Chrom agreed. He nudged the sleeping man with his foot, but he refused to budge, or even react. Chrom stood up. “Something’s wrong,” he said.

“Should we warn the others...?” I looked around the area, catching sight of a small, dark cloud gathering some hundred yards away, just above the ground. “Chrom,” I whispered, “do you see that?”

He unsheathed Falchion. “What in blazes is that?!”

The dark storm, approached us at a rapid speed, and I also drew my weapon. As the cloud drew near, I could make out dark, feathery shapes twisting around inside. The sound of cawing ravens emanated from the cloud.

“Is that...a storm of crows?” Chrom gaped. Neither of us had ever seen anything like it before.

Suddenly, a voice called out from within the cloud of ravens. “Caw!” it cried. “A sleeping guard? What could be the *caws*?” The strange voice made a giggling noise.

“What the hell...?” I muttered.

“Who’s there?!” Chrom yelled, “Show yourself! Gods’ breath, I can’t see anything through all these damned birds!” He swung Falchion at the swirling cloud of crows, crying, “Away with you!”

The crows scattered and revealed a young boy, not much older than Lissa, wearing dark robes. His hair was silvery-white, and his skin was pale. He was smiling broadly, and he radiated

cheerfulness in a way that made me feel extremely uneasy.

“What's wrong?” the boy asked. “*Caw-strophobic*?” He let out another laugh, “Nya ha ha! Oh, I slay me, I really do!” He wiped a tear away from one of his eyes.

“Who are you?” I asked him. “Why have you come here?”

“You know,” he said to me, “I thought you were all right. But it turns out you're all *fright*!” The robed boy slapped his knees as he laughed at his own joke.

“Those robes,” Chrom noted, pointing to the strange boy's dark clothes. “You're a Plegian Dark Mage. Did you put this guard to sleep?”

The Dark Mage put his hands on his hips and huffed in a humorous manner. “Now why would I go and do a thing like that? Unless I was...stark *raven* mad!” The strange boy howled with laughter and I snarled, fed up with this newcomer's behaviour.

“Talk!” I snapped. “Or face us both!”

The mage raised his arms above his head in surrender. “Hold on, there, guys. I have a message for you kind folks from the ravens.”

He cleared his throat, and then let out a shrill cawing sound, mimicking the sound of the crows.

“Roughly translated, it means...hmm. Now, what was the human word for that again? ‘Surrender’...? Or is it ‘sounded’? Oh, right - ‘surrounded’!” He nodded, pleased to have found the correct expression. “They say you're surrounded.”

Chrom's eyes narrowed. “Surrounded by what?”

“Sand, mostly.” The Dark Mage giggled. “But there's also a whole bunch of bad guys coming to murder you in your beds! They've got Plegian Dark Mages, like myself. They're the mean folks who put your hairy buddy here to sleep.”

“And what does that make *you*?” I asked.

The boy's smile widened. “A friend, of course!”

Chrom shook his head and walked off towards the heart of the camp. “We can deal with this fool later. If what he says is true, then we have to warn the others.”

I followed Chrom, and the white-haired boy ran after us. “Hey, wait! I want to join your *caws*...I mean, I can help you! I know magic! What do you say? Birds of a feather and all that?”

“We're not in the business of helping fools like you. At least, not at a time like this,” I added.

His eyebrows rose. “Oh, don't let all the joking around fool ya - I've got kind of a thing for killing. Most funny people do, you know. The two things must be linked somehow. Ever talk to a jester when he's off duty? Those guys are some sick sons of bitches!” The boy kept babbling on as I followed Chrom to the centre of camp.

Within a few minutes, every one of the Shepherds was awake and standing outside their tents. Most of them had donned their armour, too. Having been observing the Shepherds around the clock, I could tell that, despite making a valiant effort, they were all exhausted. This could be a difficult battle.

“What’s up, Chrom?” Vaike asked, while trying in vain to stifle a yawn. “The Vaike was havin’ a sweet dream, you know.”

“This is more important than a dream, Vaike.” Chrom’s voice was stern as he prepared for battle. “The Plegians are attacking. Right now. In fact, there may be some already in the camp.”

There were cries of shock from the gathered Shepherds.

“What?!”

“B-but how did they get past the guards?”

Chrom’s eyes were fierce. “The Plegians cast some sort of curse that made them all fall asleep.”

The friendly Dark Mage was about to step in and introduce himself to the Shepherds, but I held him back with an outstretched arm.

“You should probably stay back for now,” I warned him.

“Ohhhh, gotcha.” He winked at me conspiratorially. “I bet that a bunch of Ylisseans like you guys won’t appreciate having a Plegian in their midst. It’d be like having a wolf in a flock of sheep. I saw that happen, once. It was *not* a family-friendly moment.” He sighed nostalgically, but his words echoed my own fears.

“We need to set up a perimeter around the camp,” Chrom went on, “We don’t know how many of them there are, and-”

He was interrupted by an explosion of fire that erupted from one of the tents. There were suddenly bloodthirsty cries from all around us, such as “Kill the Ylisseans!” and “Death to the Shepherds!”

Chrom sighed in frustration. “So much for *that* plan,” he muttered.

I stepped forwards and said, “Maybe you should just leave the strategy to me.” In a blink of an eye, I was firing off orders. “Miriel and Ricken, come with me and bring your Wind tomes. We can use them to put out the fires and stop them from spreading around the camp. But we’ll need protection, in case we encounter any of the enemy.” I turned to Cordelia. “Pegasus knights are effective against mages, correct? I’ll need you and Sumia to come with me.”

“Will that be enough?” Chrom asked.

I scratched my chin in thought. “I’ll bring along Vaike as well. He’s fast enough to avoid any magical attacks they might throw at him.” I turned to face the group at large once more. “That’ll leave the rest of you to follow Chrom’s original plan and form a perimeter around the camp. Not only will you be able to guard against any more attackers, but you’ll also prevent the ones *inside* the camp from escaping.”

“That’s a sound plan, Robin.” He shouted to the Shepherds, “Everyone, take up positions around the camp! Quickly!”

Everyone scurried around, gathering weapons and armour before hurrying off to their positions. The Dark Mage said from beside me, “What’ll I do? You’re not going to leave me out of the fun, are you?” His voice was tinged with disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “You’re coming with me. I need to keep an eye on you. Not to mention you’ll be able to tell us more about our foe.”

The pale-faced man rubbed his hands together in glee. "This is great! I haven't been this excited since one of my organs ruptured!"

"...There is something *very* wrong with you."

We caught up to Miriel and Ricken, who were preparing Wind spells. I caught sight of two pegasi circling above, silhouetted against the stars. Presumably, it was Sumia and Cordelia, but I had no time to confirm. Ricken cried out upon seeing the Dark Mage with me, and Miriel exclaimed, "Beware! One of our foes is in our midst!"

I quickly moved between them and the white-haired boy. "Relax," I told them. "He's on our side. He's the one who informed Chrom and me about the attack."

The Dark Mage smiled pleasantly and wiggled his fingers in greeting. "I'm Henry!" he said.

Miriël adjusted her glasses and said, "I see. It appears we owe you a debt of gratitude, Henry."

Henry shook his head modestly. "Aw, no need to thank me. I don't care about politics and wars; I just want to burn some folks until they stop moving!"

And with that, he wandered off, whistling a happy tune and flicking through his dark tome. I shared a glance with Ricken, who looked thoroughly worried, and I shrugged.

"He doesn't seem to be lying," I said. "And he's not trying to kill us, at least."

Miriël sniffed. "The standard of acceptable behaviour and morality among the Shepherds has suffered an egregious decline."

"I know, Miriël. Believe me, I know."

Just then, we were set upon by a group of armed men, wearing the Plegian uniform, who had been hiding in one of the nearby tents.

"Die!" one of them roared courageously, only to receive a fireball to the face from Ricken.

"Good job!" I praised the young mage, who grinned sheepishly from under his hat.

But there were more of them, advancing on us step-by-step.

"You'll never escape us alive, scum!" a man in heavy, red armour bellowed.

"Miriël, Ricken, take out the small-fry," I ordered them. "I'm going for the big fellow."

"Understood, Robin." They obeyed quickly, drawing the attention of the Plegian infantry towards them. They disappeared off behind me, leaving me alone with the man in red armour.

"You look like the leader," I said to him as I leaped out of the way of his spear. I hoped that the banter would throw him off, distract him from the smiling Dark Mage that was sneaking slowly up behind him.

"Indeed," the armoured man exclaimed through his helmet, as he thrust his spear forward again. "I am Campari, one of the Generals of the Plegian Army and trusted confidant of King Gangrel himself."

"What does it say that the Mad King, of all people, trusts *you*?" I baited him.

"Just what are you insinuating, knave?" the general snarled. He was completely focused on me,

until a surge of dark energy struck him in the back, knocking his helmet off.

“What?!” He whirled around to see Henry giggling and holding his tome of darkness. “*You*?! How dare you betray King Gangrel for these base miscreants? You’re supposed to be loyal to the Plegian army!”

Henry shrugged. “I’ve never been one for loyalty, myself. I just wanna kill people! Why is that so hard for some folks to understand? These Ylislean guys were all gonna get slaughtered in a day. And as much as I love slaughter, it’s just not fun unless it’s drawn out.”

“You sicken me,” Campari spat. “You shall die along with these filthy Ylisleans!”

Henry’s eyes widened in excitement. “You *mean* it?!”

Just then, I heard a pegasus whinny from far above, followed by the sound of a man yelling, his voice growing louder with every passing second.

“Look out belooooooooow...!”

I looked up, and quickly stepped backwards as Vaike descended from the sky, axe raised above his head. Campari, on the other hand, was too late to react and Vaike’s axe came crashing down on his unprotected skull, cleaving it in half. Campari’s body crashed to the ground, as Vaike stood up and flexed his muscles proudly.

“Looks like Teach just got tenure!” he proclaimed.

Henry, on the other hand, kicked the dust unhappily. “Aww, I wanted to be the one to cut him up!”

“You’ll get another chance,” I promised him.

Vaike frowned as he looked at Henry, taking in his dark robes. “Isn’t this guy a Plegian, too?”

“He’s with us,” I told him quickly. “He’s been helping us fight them off.”

Vaike glanced at me, then shrugged. “I guess I know better than to not trust you, Robin.”

Suddenly, Gaius appeared out of the shadows. He cast a furtive glance around him, before popping a bonbon into his mouth and chewing with obvious relish.

“Hey, Bubbles,” he said in greeting. He nodded at Vaike. “Prof.”

“That’s ‘Teach’ to *you*, bud!” Vaike growled.

“What are you doing here, Gaius?” I asked.

“The Feroxi guards are starting to wake up,” he explained, “so Whiskers and I decided to head back here, along with the princess and the sailor.”

“‘Sailor’...?”

Gaius gestured over his shoulder as Lissa and Lon’qu appeared from behind a tent. The Feroxi man was noticeably keeping his distance from the young girl.

“Hey, Robin!” Lissa waved over at me. “Have you seen-?”

But just at that moment, there was a vicious howl and a large, furred creature barrelled into Henry,

who giggled all the way.

“No, Panne!” I yelled, running over to where she was clawing at the Dark Mage. “He’s with us! He’s on our side!”

The taguel’s head swivelled to look at me, then slowly back to the man trapped underneath her.

“I know this man-spawn,” she growled. “He’s a Grimleal Dark Mage, and a dangerous one at that.”

“Hey,” Henry croaked, “you remember me!”

“He’s proven himself to be...trustworthy,” I said, trying to placate her.

She shook her head, her long ears shaking from side to side as they always did. “This one’s lot are the monsters that murdered the exalt! He’s too dangerous to be kept alive.”

“Hey, I tried to *save* her, remember?” Henry struggled from underneath the weight of the taguel. “I told this lady with the floppy ears that the exalt was going to be killed.”

“That was *you*?” I was incredulous.

“Sure was!” Henry grinned.

“What reason would you have to spare the exalt’s life?” Panne asked.

“Ylisse is weak enough is it is,” Henry explained. “If the exalt were assassinated, I was worried you’d lose the war in a flash! That would be a terrible waste of a perfectly fun war. I guess I was lucky that you folks have such a strong leader!”

“*That* was your reason?!” Panne snarled. “I should gut you where you lay, man-spawn.”

“Wait, Panne!” Lissa spoke up before I could. “Don’t hurt him! He tried to save Emm. I believe he’s a good person, even if he *is* Plegian.”

“...Very well, sister of the exalt. I shall spare this filthy craven. For now.” And with that, Panne got up off of Henry and slinked away angrily.

Lissa sighed with relief. “That was a close one. Panne’s scary when she’s mad. You were nearly a goner!” She shrieked upon seeing the bloodstains down the Dark Mage’s front. “You’re wounded!”

Henry looked down and smiled cheerily at the sight of his own bloodied torso. “Aw, would ya look at that. I *am* wounded!”

“I’ll get help,” Lissa said, grabbing Henry by the arm and pulling him along. “Come with me to the infirmary. Olivia will help you get patched up.”

The two of them wandered off, and I began to realise that the battle was over. The shouts and cries of battle had died away and were replaced by the grim silence of the night.

We each made our excuses and left, returning to our individual tents. No doubt there would be some clean-up required in order to bring the camp back to its working state. Hopefully none of the storage and supply carts had been damaged, or else Anna would have a fit. But truthfully, all I wanted to do was sleep away the few remaining hours until dawn. We would begin marching again early in the morning, and I wanted to be at least *somewhat* able to lead an entire army.

I was drifting on the edge of unconsciousness when the flap at the entrance to my tent was flung open and someone marched in with a cheery, “Hi, Robin!”

I groaned. “Hello, Henry.”

The Dark Mage flopped down on the ground beside me. “I just got out of the infirmary! I haven’t seen so many bloodied folks in a long time. Oh, how I’ve missed war! Anyways, Chrom said that I could sleep in your tent, since I don’t have one of my own.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be sure to thank him tomorrow.”

My tent was not small, but it was typically filled with books and scrolls. It even had a desk for studying said books and scrolls, so there was very little room for the sleeping quarters. I usually made do by myself, but on this particular night Henry was practically squashed in next to me. I offered him my sheet, but he declined.

“I’m used to sleeping out in the cold,” he said. “You can keep your blanket.”

“Thank you, Henry.”

He smiled pleasantly. “Hey, we Plegians need to look out for each other, right?”

It took a moment for what he said to register, and I lurched up in the bed.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I won’t tell.”

I looked at him in shock. “How did you...?”

He raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Know you’re Plegian? Well, there’s an old saying where I come from: ‘One beetle recognises another.’ And *boy* do I love beetles! And other creepy-crawlies, too!”

“But what does it mean?” I asked.

“I have darkness inside me,” he said, his voice filled with glee, “and I can sense a lot of darkness inside of *you*, too. You hardly ever see that level of darkness in people from Ylisse or Ferox.”

“How can you sense something like that?”

He scratched his head thoughtfully. “Hmm...well, let me see...darkness is an attractive force,” he said finally. “Darkness will always seek darkness. It’s kind of like putting two magnets together.” He placed the palms of his hands close to each other, then brought them together in a resounding clap. “*Ka-pow!* That’s what having two darknesses put together is like.”

I frowned. “Are you trying to say you’re *attracted* to me?”

He chuckled. “No, no, don’t worry. It’s more like a feeling of respect or awe than physical attraction. Although, let’s face it, I’m not that great with human emotions. That’s what the crows tell me, anyway.”

We were silent for a time, until Henry asked me, “Are you going to tell the others?”

“...I don’t know, Henry.”

“Hey, they found it in their hearts to trust *me*. A little bit. And I’m *way* more bloodthirsty than you are. You’ll be fine.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Huh? For what?”

“For calling you a fool.”

“That’s okay.” Henry curled up and rolled onto his side, facing away from me. “Most people do.”

Chapter 14

After poring over the reports and maps for what seemed like hours, I could safely come to a conclusion.

“We’re trapped,” I announced.

Chrom was resting his head on the table, around which his advisors were sitting in various states of unrest. “Of *course* we are,” he said, his voice muffled from having his face pressed against the wooden surface.

It had been another week of near-restless marching since the Plegian’s last attack, and we were determined to not be caught off-guard by any sneak-attacks. Everyone was clearly exhausted from the series of sleepless nights. If we were caught unawares like that again, well...this war would be as good as over. The overall sense of despair could be felt all around the camp.

“I mean it, Chrom. If Khan Flavia’s spies are reliable-”

“And they most certainly *are*!” the East-Khan cut in.

“...Then we have to face the facts,” I continued on. “The route back to Regna Ferox is littered with Plegian troops. The area around the Ylislean border is similarly primed for an ambush. Oddly enough, the way that seems *least* defended is the road to the capital.”

“That’s got to be the Mad King’s plan.” Chrom lifted his head finally, his eyes grave and his voice grim. “He’s herding us towards his seat of power, where he’ll have plenty of troops lying in wait. We’ll be crushed if we attempt to assault Castle Plegia directly.”

“And we’ll be crushed if we attempt anything *else*!” Flavia snapped. “Where’s your spine, Prince Chrom? Where’s the warrior that strolled into my lands and conquered the arena?”

Chrom looked ashamed by the khan’s words, and he slumped back down in his seat.

“Harsh though her words may be,” I said, “the East-Khan is right, Chrom. Any attempt to escape this road we’ve been put on will lead to our defeat. Our only way forward is to march on the capital and end this war immediately. It’s our destiny, Chrom.”

“*Destiny*?” Chrom sounded out the word distastefully. “You think the gods put us on this road to hell? No, Robin, Gangrel did that. And he is not my master, whatever you may think.”

As much as the thought of fate and destiny gave me comfort, it didn’t seem to affect Chrom the same way. I tried another tactic. “Putting that aside, it makes the most logical sense to attack the capital. True, the troops from elsewhere in Plegia will probably be summoned there once we arrive, but if we move fast, we can still seize the day.”

“And who’s to say there won’t be an abundance of Plegian soldiers waiting to ambush us in the capital?” Chrom was still pessimistic, but a cheerful voice delivered a surprising burst of news.

“Actually,” Henry said, from his seat at the other end of the table, “the last time I checked, Gangrel had ordered most of his soldiers out of the capital. We were to lie in wait in different stations around the deserts, and ambush you Ylislean guys when you came marching along!”

I paused as I digested this piece of information. “So, what you’re saying is, the capital remains relatively undefended? Chrom, this could be our chance! Before word spreads to Gangrel on our

location, we approach the Plegian capital and strike while the iron is hot.”

Flavia nodded. “‘Cut off the head and the serpent dies’, right?”

“But not before it wriggles around for a little while,” Henry added helpfully.

“Hold your horses, there, you young folks,” Basilio boomed. “You’re all getting a little too hot-blooded for your own good. My men in the capital report that the castle itself is almost impregnable, certainly to an army of our size.”

“Do you think a smaller force would stand a better chance, West-Khan?” I asked.

He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I suppose that may hold some potential. I’ll check in with my spies, see what they reckon. Hell, if there’s anyone who could pull that sort of operation off, it’ll be you, Robin.” He laughed, and Henry joined in, for some reason unknown to anyone other than himself.

“How about it, Chrom?” I turned to the Ylissean prince, who looked dazed and tired, more than I had ever seen him before. “If we break into the castle, we may still have a chance to end this war.”

“And how are you going to do that?” Chrom asked.

“It’s simple,” I said. “We break in, find the Mad King himself, and then kidnap him.” I sat back, admiring the stunned looks on their faces. Even Henry’s smile seemed more surprised than humoured.

Flavia shook her head. “Your tactician is a madman, Prince Chrom.”

But I could see a tiny smile forming on Chrom’s face as he said, “Alright, Robin, answer me this: what would we do with the Mad King once we had kidnapped him?”

I told them. If their reaction had been one of surprise before, it was now one of shock.

I pressed on. “I know, Chrom, that you don’t appreciate this sort of strategy. But it’s an effective method of dealing with someone like Gangrel. He’ll be exposed for the tyrant he is and then the people will *beg* us to rid them of him.”

Chrom shook his head. “I always knew you were a mad bastard, Robin. But this...”

Henry was clutching his sides in uncontrollable laughter. But the khans looked serious.

“Robin,” Flavia said, “this sort of action could have consequences for all of us.”

“This entire *war* has had consequences for all of us. We all agreed that the Mad King’s reign must be ended as soon as possible. I’m not saying that the ends justify the means, but you can’t say that someone like King Gangrel doesn’t deserve it. We’re at *war*, Chrom. We can’t afford to go soft now.”

Chrom was still reluctant. “This isn’t how Emmeryn would have done it,” he whispered.

“But this is what he would have done to *her* if he had the chance,” I pointed out. “He opted to have her assassinated in her own home, but you can’t deny that this is something that he would have resorted to.”

“Can we truly allow ourselves to sink down to the level of the Mad King?” Chrom asked.

“Chrom,” I said with great urgency, “this man had your sister *killed*. And you would pass over the

chance to see that justice is done?”

I saw his eyes shift, and I knew that I had convinced him.

“I don’t approve of your methods,” he said, “but...you’re right. Damn you, Robin, you’re right. We don’t have any other choice.”

“I’ll take full responsibility,” I said, but Chrom shook his head.

“*I’m* the future exalt,” he said, “and *I’ll* take responsibility for the actions of my men.”

Flavia nodded firmly. “Well said.”

Basilio stood, towering over us as he said, “I’ll see to it that my men make a full report. They’ll meet up with us as we march, so we’d better hit the road.”

“Understood.”

The strategy meeting was adjourned.

Later that evening, when the sun had sunk down to the horizon and the stars were beginning to appear, a group of men in Plegian army uniforms, but bearing the sigil of Ferox, entered the camp. The setting sun cast long shadows over the camp as we met with them. They stood in a line in front of the tents and saluted Chrom as we approached. One of them, donned in plate armour and a helmet with a visor, stepped forward and said, “Prince Chrom of Ylisse, we are the spies the West-Khan has told you about. We bring urgent news from the Plegian capital.” His voice was formal and stern.

“Excellent,” Chrom said. “You may make your report before the leaders of this army in person. Unless the men have other reports, they are dismissed for now.”

The lead spy nodded, and the other spies bowed before turning and walking away.

“Come with me,” Chrom directed the lead spy towards the meeting tent. “The khans await us.”

“That’s all well and good,” the spy said, in a much more casual and familiar tone, “but can I take off this useless piece of metal first?”

Chrom turned and frowned at the man, who lifted his visor to reveal a young man’s face, with tanned skin and glittering eyes.

“Antonio.” I nodded curtly to the Feroxi man.

He gave me a wink in return. “Robin.”

“Full of surprises as ever, I see.”

“I could say the same to you, tactician.”

We passed through the entrance to the tent, where the khans were once again seated at the great table. Basilio stood upon our entrance, and his serious face split into a broad grin upon seeing our new companion.

“Antonio, you little mutt!” he roared and pulled the young man into a bear hug. “It’s been too long.”

Antonio returned the gesture, which was difficult given the heavy armour he had donned, and he said, "I'm happy to see you, too, old geezer."

The West-Khan laughed heartily as they broke apart. "*This* is the kind of respect I get from my men? Makes me wish *I* were exalt!"

The two of them laughed and conversed with each other like old friends. I didn't want to break up their sweet reunion, but Flavia had no such sentiments.

"Come, now," she said, "the young lad came here for a reason other than to butt heads with you, oaf."

Antonio nodded courteously to her. "East-Khan."

She didn't respond, but rather assumed a frosty expression.

"Khan Flavia is correct," Antonio said after an uncomfortable silence. "I've come all the way from the capital with news of the Mad King's recent actions. I am sorry I couldn't send a message warning you of the recent attack."

Chrom waved his hand as he and I both took our seats at the table. "No one was seriously injured. And your duties are not to us, but to the khans."

And for the first time since I had first seen him, Antonio smiled genuinely instead of smirking arrogantly. "You're right. Thank you, Prince Chrom."

Antonio faced the tent's inhabitants and said, "King Gangrel is plotting something: an ambush at the capital that will eliminate this army once and for all."

I sat up in my seat. "You have evidence of this?"

"Only my word, tactician. And that's good enough for a khan."

"Then it's good enough for me, too," I said. "Tell us about Gangrel. Has he made any significant movements recently?"

Antonio frowned uncharacteristically. "It's true what they call him; he is very much a mad king. His words and his actions are all evidence of a warped mind. He is clearly unfit to continue reigning over this kingdom. Just this morning, I was present when he and his...associate were holding a strategy meeting."

"Associate?" Flavia raised an eyebrow.

"He probably means that Aversa woman," Chrom said. "We met her at the border during the unsuccessful negotiations there." He gritted his teeth at the unpleasant memory. "That's when this whole mess began."

Antonio nodded. "I gathered as much information as I could on King Gangrel, but a lot about that woman remains a mystery to me. All I know is that she is ruthless and dangerous, possibly even more so than the Mad King himself. During the strategy meeting, she murdered one of the king's men who had been the bearer of bad news."

"Tell us more about this strategy meeting," I said.

Antonio took a breath, and then said, "To be honest, there wasn't much 'strategy' being discussed.

Most of it was just incomprehensible babbling from the Mad King. It was early in the morning. All of Gangrel's top generals were called to the audience chamber of the castle. They each took some men with them, in case quick orders were given. I was underneath General Mustafa, just so you know. Anyway, there was an interruption to the meeting when a messenger arrived at the palace. He had news of your army, Prince Chrom, but not enough to satisfy the king or his aide. It seems they desired information on the Fire Emblem, and when that information was not delivered, the dark woman slaughtered the messenger mercilessly. A few moments later, Gangrel mentioned that there would be a massacre when the Shepherds arrived. Then the woman said...something I can't repeat in front of royalty to the king, who picked her up and carried her back to his quarters. Most of us took that as our cue to leave."

"Just as well, too," Chrom said. "Your surveillance has been invaluable to us. Thank you, Antonio."

"It was my pleasure." His smirk returned in full force. "Will that be all?"

"Actually," I said, "I think you may be of use to us again this day. We're planning to have a small group break into Castle Plegia under cover of darkness. Once inside, we plan to kidnap the king and bring him back here."

Antonio's eyebrows rose. "I'm impressed. And you want me to help?"

"Of course," I replied. "You know the innards of the castle better than most people in this camp."

"How are you planning to break in?" he asked.

"Don't worry," I said. "I know just the man for the job."

"Then it's decided," Chrom said. "Antonio will accompany Robin's team into Castle Plegia and kidnap King Gangrel." He paused. "Er, that is, if the khans will allow it?"

Flavia waved her hand dismissively. "Do what you want with him."

I stood up from my chair. "Then I'd better go and inform the others. We'll be leaving for the capital just before midnight. If you'll excuse me." I nodded to the khans and to Chrom, before turning and walking out of the tent.

On the way out, I heard Khan Basilio mutter, "Just out of curiosity, Antonio, what exactly *did* Aversa say to the king?"

Antonio leaned up to the great khan's ear and whispered something.

The khan's eyes widened.

Midnight came, and we set off, having packed our provisions into our individual satchels. Chrom protested, naturally, saying how he wanted to come with us. Somehow, I managed to convince him of the danger of our mission, and how bad it would be if he were to be caught in Gangrel's own castle. He reluctantly agreed to stay.

Antonio led the way to the capital, taking a detour through the desert to avoid a Plegian checkpoint on the road. With him was myself, Gaius, Lon'qu, Henry, Panne and Kellam. The six of them were deemed suitable for this operation based on their own sets of talents: Antonio and Henry knew the way to and through the castle; Gaius was a world-class thief, capable of breaking into the castle's keep; Lon'qu was a skilled myrmidon, capable of being as light on his feet as any

thief; Panne was similarly light-footed and had succeeded in sneaking into the Ylissean palace alone, and Kellam was...well, Kellam. If *we* couldn't see him when we *knew* he was there, then how could the palace guards possibly notice him?

"And what about you, Robin?" Antonio asked as we waded through the dark sands. "What do *you* add to this mission?"

I smiled and said, "Why, Antonio, I'm the *brains* of this operation. Surely I deserve to participate in my own plan?"

"Oh, really?" He smirked. "Is that all?"

"Well...not entirely." My smile faded. "I know how much Chrom wanted to be a part of this mission. This is *his* war, after all. He's my closest friend, and I know how much this means to him. So I'm coming along in his stead."

Antonio simpered at me. "How utterly adorable. You really are close to him. The bond between two men is truly a beautiful thing."

I glowered. "Don't mock me."

"I'm not mocking you. Why do people always think I'm making fun of them?" He gestured to his face, with his trademark conniving smile fixed on it. "This is just how I smile. I can't help that."

"I never can tell when you're joking, Antonio."

"And that's why I'm the best."

"Right."

Before too long, a dark shape appeared on the horizon, growing larger with every step forward. Even from this distance, I could see the towers and battlements of the castle stretching high into the night sky, blotting out the stars.

"It's huge!" I muttered in awe.

Antonio shook his head. "The castle itself is not all that big. No larger than Castle Ferox, at any rate. Look closely at the base of the building. What do you see?"

The others heard the Feroxi man's words, and stared intensely at the bottom of the dark castle. The closer we came, the more it became apparent that the castle was, in fact, built on a large rock or hill.

Panne snarled. "I smell death."

Gaius looked at the taguel sceptically. "From this distance?"

"There is something..." she said, a strange quality to her voice that I had never heard before. Was it fear?

Gaius peered intently at the base of the castle, which we were drawing closer and closer to. "What, the castle?"

But something was wrong. The castle was only a few miles away now, and it became clear that there was some sort of edifice beneath it, at the foot of the large rock that the great keep was perched on.

Lon'qu's sharp eyes picked out the details first. "Gods," he hissed, "It's a *skull*."

A dreadfully familiar chill ran up my spine as the shape of the great skull became clear.

"It's massive!" Kellam croaked. "What kind of creature could have left it?"

Henry giggled. "They say it used to belong to Grima. I bet when he wakes up, he'll have a real killer of a headache! Nya ha ha!"

"I-is that really the Fell Dragon's skull?" Kellam asked.

Antonio shrugged. "I doubt it. It's probably a replica created by the Grimleal in an attempt to intimidate anyone foolish enough to attack the castle. Like us."

"Intimidates the hell outta *me*," Gaius muttered.

"I sense dark energy emanating from it." Panne's eyes were narrowed. "Unlike any I have ever felt before."

"You wanna turn back around, Whiskers? Walk back to camp alone, with your tail between your legs?"

"Nonsense. I do not fear a dead creature." But the taguel's voice was hesitant.

I didn't blame her for being afraid. Even Antonio looked uneasy as we marched towards the gargantuan skull. But something kept pulling my feet closer to the monstrosity. I felt almost as though I was in a trance. My body was moving of its own accord. I should have felt fear, but instead, a strange feeling of comfort rose up inside me. Strange images flashed through my mind as I drew nearer and nearer to the skull of the Fell Dragon.

A voice whispered insidiously in my ear, as though carried by the wind. "*The time has not yet come.*"

And just like that, the feeling passed. I could control my own body once again. But looking up at the great edifice that loomed towards us, I was certain that that would not be the last time I would experience that sensation.

We passed the skull, keeping our distance even though we knew that it could not harm us. Right next to the massive skull was the sheer cliffs of the castle rock.

I found I was able to speak again. "What now?"

"There's a roadway leading up the back of the plateau into the castle's front gates," Antonio explained. "But we probably don't want to go that way unless we absolutely have to."

Henry stuck up his hand and said, "Ooh, I know! There's a hidden trail leading up the side of the rock. It goes straight into the castle!"

"Really?" This sounded too good to be true. "Does anyone else know about this trail?"

He nodded. "Most of the guards do. But no one really uses it because it's so dangerous."

Kellam winced. "You mean people have fallen?"

"You bet!" Henry exclaimed brightly. "And they went *splat* when they hit the ground! Nya ha ha!"

I was wary of this hidden trail, but what other choice did we have? “We’ll take the trail.”

Antonio looked at me. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure that most of us can manage the climb. And Panne can take the rear so she can catch us in case one of us *does* fall.”

“I dunno, Bubbles,” Gaius muttered, “I’m not exactly the best climber.”

“This is true,” said Panne.

“We don’t have time to think of something else,” I said. “Either we take this path, or we give up.” I turned to Henry, “Where is this hidden trail?”

He smiled and pointed to a spot at the base of the great rock, some distance away. “It starts there. The steepest section is at the beginning, but it evens out once you get near the top.”

“Alright,” I said, “let’s go.”

After over an hour of climbing, we finally reached the top of the plateau. We couldn’t stop to rest, even though we were all clearly tired out from the climb. Gaius had to consume several sugary sweets before he was able to recover. Even Panne seemed affected by the long climb. But we had succeeded in reaching the outer walls of the keep.

“Antonio,” I called, “do you know a way in?”

He pointed to a secure-looking door on the castle’s wall. “That door leads inside the keep. But I’ve never seen it unlocked. No one ever goes near it.”

Gaius stepped forward, grinning. “That sounds like a challenge to me.”

He pulled a sharp, pointed instrument out of one of his pockets and inserted it into the lock. He stepped in front of the lock and it was lost from view for a few seconds, until there was a *click* and the door was unlocked.

Gaius casually popped a jelly bean into his mouth. “I was wrong - no challenge at all.”

I frowned. “Doesn’t the security seem a bit...basic for a castle?”

Antonio grunted. “Maybe that’s just overconfidence on the Plegians’ part. They didn’t think anyone would make it all the way up here, so they didn’t bother with maximum security.”

But something was still off about all this. Gaius noticed my expression and said, “We could try to find another way in, if you want. It’s up to you, Bubbles.”

I shook my head. “This may be the best opportunity we can get. We’ll push on.”

Gaius nodded. “Righto.” He gave the rusted door a firm shove, and it groaned open. We all followed him in. Immediately, we encountered a small, dark room, filled with an unpleasant and unbearable stench. The walls were caked in grime and other sickening substances. It was too dark to make out much, but it was obvious what we had stumbled into.

“A latrine,” I muttered, placing my hand over my mouth and not daring to breathe in more than necessary.

Antonio's voice was similarly disgusted. "Well, that explains why no one ever comes near the door."

Panne pawed at her nose. "The habits of you man-spawn sicken me."

"You're not the only one who's sickened, Whiskers. I think I can feel my jelly beans coming back up..."

"Well, you're in the right place for *that*! Nya ha ha!"

"Let's go," I said. "Unless any of you want to spend any longer in this place?"

We all agreed to leave through the door on the far side of the foul room. We tried not to think about what we were stepping on as we passed through and didn't look back.

The awful smell faded as we left the latrine. On the other side of the door was a brighter room, and a cleaner one at that. The conditions were still basic, and far from what I would have expected from a castle. It was warm inside the new room, and we followed Gaius as he led the way. He peered around the corner of a wall, and then quickly ducked back. He placed one finger to his lips, and in the silence we heard several gruff, male voices.

"...Captain Vasto says those Ylisseean dogs aren't gonna last another day."

We all tensed as some Plegian soldiers entered the room. I counted four of them, chatting amongst themselves. It became clear that the wall we were behind was some sort of partition. If the soldiers decided that they needed to visit the privy, then we would quickly be discovered.

"You sure it's alright for us to be slackin' off like this?" One of the Plegians asked.

"Quit worryin'," another said. "The next shift doesn't start for another hour. We'll be back at our posts before anyone notices we're missin'."

There was the noise of clinking armour, then a rustling sound of clothing being removed.

"But what if Aversa comes along? If she finds out we were skivin'..."

"Ah, that bitch is still in the king's bed at this time of night, doin' what she does best." There was a round of laughter, then the sound of bare footsteps slapping against the floor, moving away from our position, growing softer and softer.

We waited for another minute, before Gaius peeked out from behind the wall. He waved to us, signalling that the coast was clear. We stepped out from the wall and into what looked like a changing room for the castle guards. There were bundles of clothes and pieces of armour lying on the floor, having been left there by the men who had come in. On the other side of the room was a door, where the guards had entered. To the right was a corridor leading to the bathing area. The voices of the guards could still be heard over the sounds of splashing water.

"Now what?" Gaius asked in a low voice.

"I thought you said that door led into the keep?" I whispered to Antonio. "This place looks like a part of the guards' barracks."

"The two buildings are connected," Antonio explained quietly. "We can still get to the king's quarters from here."

"Actually," I said, a thought suddenly striking me, "this might work out in our favour." I pointed

to the discarded uniforms, left in piles on the floor. “We can pass through without being detected if we disguise ourselves.”

Antonio shrugged. “Hey, it worked for me.” He gestured to his clothes: he was still wearing the uniform of the Plegian guards. “I didn’t manage to find a change of clothes back at the camp, so I never took these off. In fact...” He opened his satchel and pulled out a visored helmet. “I *knew* this would come in handy!”

There were only four uniforms in the changing room. After a quick count, I realised that one of us would have to go undisguised.

Panne came to the same conclusion. “I have no desire to wear such unappealing garments.”

“But how will you get past the guards?” I asked her.

She sniffed. “I am a taguel. We have no need for such pathetic façades. We are the night itself.”

I relented. “Alright. That leaves one uniform for myself, Gaius, Lon’qu and Henry.”

“What about me, Robin?”

I jumped. I had forgotten Kellam was with us. “Sorry, Kellam. I never even thought of you.”

“It’s quite alright.”

“Hey,” Henry whispered, “why do *I* need a uniform? I’m already wearing Plegian clothes.” He tactfully stifled his trademark giggle.

“You’re right,” I agreed. “Then Kellam can take the last uniform. Let’s do it.”

We had to strip down to our undergarments in order to put the uniforms on. I shrugged off my cloak and the rest of my plainclothes, reluctantly stuffing them into my satchel.

“Do you have to stare like that, Whiskers?” I heard Gaius complain as he pulled his shirt up over his head.

“Does my gaze unsettle you, man-spawn?”

“It’s not that I *mind*,” he muttered, “but I just wanted to mention that I’m usually in much better shape. With the stress of this blasted war, I’ve been eatin’ more sweets than usual. Usually I’m a real piece of eye candy. Belly like a washboard, glutes like a lumberja-”

“Keep your voice down,” Lon’qu grunted. He had already finished changing, naturally.

The guard whose uniform I had stolen hadn’t been wearing any smallclothes, and so the uniform felt uncomfortably warm. The helmet stank of sweat and body odour. I wrinkled my nose as I pulled the visor down over my face.

Antonio had noticed. “Something wrong, Robin?”

“...This helmet kind of smells,” I muttered.

“What are you talkin’ about!?” Gaius hissed. “My helmet reeks!”

“My uniform’s too big,” Kellam muttered sheepishly. Indeed, the sleeves were far too long for his arms, and the shirt was rather loose around his middle. “And the boots are wet,” he added.

“My gloves are all slimy,” Gaius said. “There's cookie crumbs in my pockets...oh, wait. Those are mine, actually.”

“We don't have time for complaints,” Lon'qu growled from underneath his own visor.

I sighed. “Lo'qu is right, as always.” I just wanted to wear my cloak again.

Everyone had finished changing, and so we were about to leave. But then, another thought struck me.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “If those guards come back and find their clothes missing, they'll probably raise the alarm.”

Antonio nodded and drew his sword from its scabbard. “I'll take care of them.”

“Go with him, Lon'qu,” I ordered the myrmidon, who nodded.

The two Feroxi men stalked silently down the corridor to the bathing area. There was a sudden cry that was silenced almost immediately. A few moments later, the pair emerged from the steam, swords dripping with blood.

“Good work,” I told them, ignoring Henry's delighted gasp. “Everyone, be on your guard when we head out. Panne, stay close.”

“Do not underestimate me. I will not be discovered.”

“Then let's go.” We all marched out the door, into the depths of the castle.

The corridors of Castle Plegia were mostly empty at this time of night. Guards were patrolling the corridors or stationed outside important rooms, but we rarely encountered any directly. Those we passed in the hallways nodded to us and some averted their gaze once they saw that Henry was with us. The Dark Mage seemed to know every man and woman in the castle by name, and somehow managed to differentiate between them all despite their similar attire. It helped, I supposed, that very few of them had their visors down. Indeed, with the visor concealing my own face, it was very hard to see where I was going. I had to position it so that I could see clearly, while the visor's shadow still covered my eyes.

“Henry,” I muttered out of the corner of my mouth, as he waved to a passing group of nervous-looking guards, “we're trying to keep a low profile. Don't draw unnecessary attention.”

“Aww,” he pouted, while still somehow keeping the corners of his mouth up. “But this might be the last time I'll get a chance to see my friends!”

I hadn't realised that he had thought of these people as his friends. “Are you sure you'll be able to fight them, if the time comes?”

He gave me a quizzical look. “Of course. Why wouldn't I be able to kill my friends?”

I swallowed. “Right. Never mind.”

We reached a fork in the corridor, with one path leading off to the left, and the other to the right.

Antonio jerked his head to the left. “That's the way to the audience chamber.”

I nodded, and we turned down the left-hand side corridor, only to see another Dark Mage strolling towards us. It was a young woman - not much older than myself, I would have wagered - and her

hair was as black as a raven's down. She was dressed in traditional Dark Mage clothing, which left little to the imagination. I heard Antonio clear his throat quietly. She glanced at our group as she passed, glaring frostily at Henry, who smiled obliviously back. But, for a brief moment, our eyes met. Her expression seemed to change, her eyes widening and her pale face becoming flushed with colour. But then the moment passed, and we were gone. I pulled my visor down as much as I dared, hoping fervently that we hadn't just been discovered.

I thought Kellam was thinking the same thing, until he whispered, "She's beautiful."

Antonio grinned, turning around to watch the woman leave. "Makes me wish I were a Plegian."

After travelling along a series of corridors decorated with red banners and emblems, we reached a set of huge, brass doors, guarded by two serious-looking Plegian soldiers. This was the entrance to the audience chamber.

"Any bright ideas?" I muttered to Antonio as we approached the guards.

"Don't ask me," he shot back. "*You're* the tactician."

We stopped in front of the doors. The guards stared impassively at us.

"What do *you* want?" one of them grunted. "State your purpose."

I stepped forward, taking charge. "We're the relief shift."

"All five of you?" The guard was sceptical, but I forged on.

"They're steppin' up security 'round here." I tried to adopt the Plegians' harsh, accented way of speaking. It came to me far more easily than I would have liked. "Times of war, ya know? Captain Vasto's orders," I added, recalling a name mentioned by one of the guards in the bathroom.

The guard shrugged, abandoning his professional façade. "I s'pose I know better than to cross Vasto." He nodded to his fellow guard, and they both stepped away from the doors. "I guess that means we can hit the baths early, eh, Marco?"

The other guard grinned, and I realised the imminent danger. We couldn't let these guards return to the bathroom and discover the bodies of their comrades.

Fortunately, Antonio quickly invented an excuse. "You talkin' 'bout the bathroom by the barracks? Sorry, lads, but one of the pipes burst down there and mucked up the water. The whole place stinks worse than a mutt in heat."

The guards both groaned.

"That means we'll have to go all the way out into the *bailey*," one of them complained.

They both departed, muttering bitterly about their own misfortune. We waited cautiously for several minutes after they had gone, before opening the door to the audience chamber. Kellam and Lon'qu remained behind as lookouts as we went inside. Similar to the palace in Ylistol, the king's quarters were just beyond the audience chamber. Thankfully, there were no more guards left beyond the big, brass doors. Only a few more rooms were left between us and the Mad King's chamber.

We finally stopped outside another set of brass doors, albeit smaller than the ones at the entrance to the audience chamber. The door was locked, and so Gaius worked his magic once again.

“Chrom owes me double for this,” he muttered as he fiddled with the lock. “I deserve a month’s supply of liquorice, at *least*.”

“I’ll have a chat with him,” I promised. Secretly, I planned to negotiate that month’s supply down to a fortnight. If we made it out of the castle alive, that was.

Gaius pushed the door open gently, and we crept into the darkened and musty room. There were candles lit on the walls, casting a dim light around the chamber. The room was surprisingly bare, albeit draped with red-and-black banners and emblems, displaying its resident’s pride. In the exact centre of the chamber lay a giant, four-poster bed with red sheets. And lying face down in the bed, with the sheets rolled down to his waist, was Gangrel. His face was pressed into the pillow, and his exposed back was rising and falling slowly with the rhythm of his breathing. Antonio caught my eye and nodded, and we moved slowly towards the bed. Gaius and Henry followed warily. As we drew close, there was a sharp intake of breath from the Plegian King, and he turned his head to the side where it lay on the pillow.

“Aversa?” he mumbled. “Is that you?” His eyes flickered open, and he caught sight of us. “What? You’re not Aversa!” He twisted around and sat up in the bed, glaring contemptuously at us. “What are you guards doing in *my* chamber at this hour? I thought I told you to wake me when those wretched Ylisseans had arrived? Don’t you *know* that I have orders not to be disturbed until then?!” His voice was shrill with anger.

I lifted up my visor and said, “Sorry, *sire*, but we aren’t the guards you were expecting.”

“What? I know you...” His eyes flickered in recognition, then narrowed in bitter loathing. With one swift movement, Gangrel swept away the sheets that were covering his body and he sprinted for the door. But Gaius was too fast. The thief seemed to appear out of thin air as he stepped between the king and the door. With a single jab, Gaius struck the Mad King on the temple with his bare fist, sending the bearded man toppling backwards. He collapsed to the ground, groaning.

“Ylisseans!” the king spat with sheer contempt. “How dare you enter my castle, my very *chamber*?!” His face was twisted with malice as he bellowed, “You will never conquer me! Not you, not your princely friend, not *anyone*!” His mouth began to foam, and then suddenly his eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp.

Henry chuckled. “Don’t worry, he’s not dead. I just used the same spell that made your furry Feroxi friends fall fast asleep.”

“Good work,” I said again. “All of you.”

Antonio made a disgusted sound. “I don’t know which is worse, that he’s naked or that he’s still wearing his crown.”

I tried to avoid looking at the Mad King’s nude body, and said, “We need to go. The guards will be changing shifts soon, and we’ll be discovered if we’re not out of this castle by then.”

“What’ll we do with His Majesty, here?” Gaius gingerly poked Gangrel’s unconscious form with his foot.

“We’ll take him with us,” I replied. “Lon’qu can carry him. Or Panne. But make sure to leave the crown here.”

“What for?” Antonio was curious.

“It’s all part of the plan.”

Antonio, being the strongest of the four of us, reluctantly picked up the sleeping king and held him in his arms. We passed back through the audience chamber and reached the set of brass doors that lead out into the castle's corridors. I knocked on the door three times, and there was a reply of three more knocks, signalling that all was clear.

When we opened the doors and stepped through, Lon'qu took one look at us and frowned deeply.

"It's alright," I reassured him. "Everything is going according to plan. But, could one of you carry the king?"

Kellam stepped forwards, almost making me jump again. "I'll take him. I'm used to carrying around dead weight."

Antonio handed off the 'dead weight' to the other man, who slung Gangrel over his shoulder.

"He's not going to wake up, is he?" Kellam asked warily.

Henry beamed at the knight. "Don't worry! The curse I laid on him ought to leave him snoozing for half a day, at least!"

"Which gives us plenty of time to get back to the camp," I said.

"But, how are we going to get out of this castle unnoticed?" Antonio asked. "I think we might arouse suspicion if we're seen carrying around an unconscious, naked king."

"Don't worry about that," I told him. "I have a plan."

I placed two of my fingers to my mouth and whistled sharply. A moment later, there was the sound of padded footsteps on the carpeted floor, and Panne appeared around the corner, sprinting towards us in her beastly form.

"What do you require me for?" the taguel asked.

"I need you to act as a decoy and lure the guards away from us while we make our escape."

Panne's nose twitched. "I had believed we were attempting to remain *undiscovered*."

"Please, Panne?" I begged of her. "You're the only one who can avoid their clutches so easily. I'll give you a fresh batch of carrots when we get back to camp," I promised.

Panne turned away from us and said, "Keep your vegetables. I will meet you outside the castle." And with that, she sprinted off.

"Let's go," I said to the others. "Panne won't be able to divert *all* of the guards' attention. We may need to fight our way out."

Henry rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "This is gonna be so much fun!"

Gaius muttered, "I wish I had your enthusiasm, Stone-Face."

We were about halfway back towards the hidden entrance we had come in through when the troubles began. By then, there were shouts and strangled cries coming from all around us, likely due to Panne's interference. The plan was to escape with Gangrel, unnoticed in the chaos. Unfortunately, we were discovered by a stray guard who crossed our path. We were so stunned

by his sudden appearance that he had time to call for help.

“Intruders!” he bellowed. “They have the king!”

He turned and ran off down the corridor. Gaius attempted to give chase, but the guard stopped running just as suddenly as he had started. He coughed and retched, falling to his knees and finally collapsing to the floor.

Gaius knelt down next to the immobile guard. “He’s dead,” Gaius pronounced.

Henry smiled widely. “Wow! That was Dark Magic!”

“Did you do that?” I asked him, and he shook his head in response.

A section of the wall closest to us slid open, revealing a hidden passage. A voice from within hissed, “Come inside. Hurry!”

We didn’t have much of a choice. There were footsteps echoing down the hallway towards us, indicating the arrival of more guards. They had obviously heard the dead man’s cry. I passed through the open doorway and into a room that was pitch-black and filled with the smell of dust. The others followed me in hesitantly, and the wall slid promptly shut behind us, leaving us all in darkness. I felt something warm pressing up against my body. I assumed it was one of the others standing close.

“I can’t see a thing,” Kellam muttered from somewhere in the room.

“What? Whose arm is this?” Antonio asked.

“Um, I think it’s Gangrel’s.”

“...Oh. Right.”

“Hold on a sec,” Henry muttered, and there was the sound of rustling fabric as he reached into his robes. I heard him mutter a quick incantation, and then suddenly a fireball appeared between his fingers, burning brightly in the darkened room. The light glinted off of his bared teeth as he expanded the fireball until the room was as bright as day. The walls were made of brick, worn by age, and it seemed that the ‘room’ was actually a passageway that stretched off into the darkness.

“Thanks, Henry,” I said, and then I jumped as I caught sight of the face that was inches away from my own.

“Hello,” the face said.

Lon’qu grunted in surprise. “Who’s there?”

“Oh, just the girl who saved your pathetic lives.” I stepped away from the speaker, and I could see her for the first time. Her hair was black and her skin was fair, and her skimpy clothes brought back a memory from a short while ago.

“I remember you,” I said. “You walked past us on the corridor earlier. Why did you save us? Aren’t you with the Plegians?”

“Death comes for all of us eventually,” the girl muttered. “Why invite it early, being part of a cause I don’t believe in?”

I was confused. “So...should I take that as a no?”

An insidious smile spread across the girl's face. "Let's just say I'm keeping my options open. I have a bit of a rebellious streak, I'm afraid. A...dark side."

"And for that, you'd betray your king?" Antonio asked.

"A king demands respect from his subjects. It's rather difficult to respect a man like *that*." She pointed to the unconscious man, slumped over Kellam's shoulder.

"What do you want from us?" I asked her.

"I want you to take me with you. This castle is so stifling for a girl like me."

"That's great," Antonio said, "but we're trapped here. The castle guards are surrounding us as we speak."

"Don't worry about that," the girl said. "I know a quick way out of here. It's just through this passageway." She pointed off into the darkness, which was far too deep to be illuminated by Henry's fire.

"If you thought the castle was so 'stifling'," Antonio said with suspicion in his voice, "then why didn't you leave this way before now?"

"Well, maybe now I have an ulterior motive." I felt her soft, feminine hands brushing against my chest, stroking me gently. I didn't stop her. "But it's up to you whether you trust me or not. You can always just turn around and walk back out into the hallway. I'm sure the guards will be *delighted* to see you." Her tone was dripping with sarcasm.

"We don't have a choice," I told the others. "We'll just have to believe her for now."

The Dark Mage brought her face close to mine and whispered, "My name is Tharja. What's yours?"

"I-I'm Robin," I replied, my throat becoming very dry.

"It's a *pleasure* to meet you, Robin." Tharja's breath fluttered against my cheek as she drew closer still.

I wanted it, but my better judgement took over and I shook my head as I stepped back. "We need to go. Lead the way, Tharja."

"...As you wish." Her voice was tinged with disappointment. She turned away from me and stalked off down the passageway. We all followed her.

"Hey there, Tharja! It's nice to meet you!" Henry joined his fellow Dark Mage and greeted her heartily.

Tharja stared at him flatly. "I know you."

"You do?"

"I've heard all sorts of stories about you from around the castle. A silver-haired youth with a knowledge of curses and an extraordinary gift for magic. A boy guarded by fierce crows so that very few had seen the true extent of his powers."

Henry whistled appreciatively. "Oh wow! Now *that's* a reputation! Yeah, crows have always had a thing for me, I guess. Dunno why."

“So, why have you joined with these Ylisseans?”

The silver-haired boy shrugged. “I don't get into politics. I just want to toss fireballs at bad guys.”

“Interesting. You have a unique attitude for one with so much darkness in your heart.”

“Aw, shucks.”

“Um, hello?”

Tharja hissed in surprise, before whirling around to face the man who had spoken. “The last person who snuck up on me like that isn't a person anymore. How did you stay so quiet? Is it a spell of some kind?”

“Not that I know of,” Kellam replied.

“Right. Well, nice talking to you, quiet man.”

“My name is Kellam.”

“I don't care.”

The hallway was filled with a heavy, awkward silence. I was perplexed by our new addition to the team. She was so forward when she was speaking with me, and yet so curt when talking to others. What made me so different in her eyes?

Eventually, a light emerged from the end of the passageway, prompting Henry to quench his fireball. The light was coming from around the edges of a large, iron door.

“This leads outside,” Tharja explained.

Gaius cracked his knuckles. “Step aside, Sunshine. It's time for a thief to do what he does...”

Tharja swept her hand, muttering a brief incantation, and a burst of fire came from the tips of her fingers, blasting the door open and almost taking it clean off its hinges.

“...best,” the thief finished lamely.

We stepped out through the open doorway to the outside world. We were back near the edge of the great plateau upon which the castle was built. Dawn was breaking, and the sun was beginning to rise and fill the dark, bleak desert with light. It was almost beautiful, in a way.

But we weren't even allowed this moment of peace to ourselves. There were shouts from the battlements above, and I knew we were still being pursued.

“There's a trail leading down the side of the cliffs,” Tharja told us.

“We know,” Antonio muttered. “How do you think we got into the castle in the first place?”

She glared at the Feroxi spy. “Do you want to die, little man?”

“How far away is the trail?” I asked the Dark Mage, hoping to bring her attention back to the task at hand.

“It's just beyond this corner,” she replied.

We followed the direction she had indicated, and we came across the door we had entered through

- the one that had led to the latrine. Panne was waiting outside the door, looking rather impatient.

“Thank you for everything, Panne.”

She sniffed. “For a taguel of my stature, it was nothing at all.”

Her pink eyes narrowed when she saw Tharja, but I quickly told her, “She’s on our side. She helped us escape.”

Panne said, “Very well. We must leave.”

“Alright. Everyone, watch your step. We don’t want any casualties. When we reach the bottom, we’ll split up into three groups so that the Plegians can’t track us. We’ll meet up back at the camp. Tharja, you’ll come with me. Is everyone clear?”

They answered in the affirmative, and we began the long climb down.

Chapter 15

Although my mind was exhausted from staying awake through the night, there was no time for me to rest. We had arrived back at the camp early in the morning, and I immediately retreated to my tent in order to plan our next move. War was not as simple as a game of chess, which ended as soon as the enemy king had been captured. Now that Gangrel was in our possession, it wouldn't be long before the Plegians figured out who had taken their ruler. The act of kidnapping Gangrel would likely provoke a counter-attack from the Plegians. We would need to be prepared to negotiate with them or, failing that, fight for our lives.

When we had all returned, we met with Chrom in the camp's central square. Gangrel, still unconscious from Henry's sleeping spell, was immediately taken to a holding tent. Garments were provided.

"Well done," Chrom said to us all. "You have done good work. You have my permission to rest now."

We were all dismissed to our tents, but I couldn't sleep. Not while I was still needed. A tactician can only rest when the war has ended.

Around noon, as I was studying some strategic magical spells from a particularly hefty tome, the flap of my tent was opened and someone walked in.

The visitor whistled as he inspected the interior of my tent. "You sure you have enough books in here, Robin?"

I glanced up from my desk, my neck aching, to see Antonio standing at the entrance to the tent. He was now dressed in his traditional, red, Feroxi tunic. He looked far more casual now than I had ever seen him before.

"You need to lighten this place up," he advised, with that smirk of his fixed across his mouth. "Bring in a few scantily-clad women, that sort of thing. Mix in a bit of Feroxi mead and then we have a party!"

"That sort of thing would only be a distraction," I told him, turning back to face my desk. "This war is at a turning point. I can't afford to relax now."

"You've changed, Robin," he mused. "The war's hardened you, made you so serious."

"That's what happens when you're put in charge of an entire army," I replied.

"I remember our first conversation, back before the parley with the Mad King; you were so young and naïve then." He sighed fondly. "And now look at you. Tacticians grow up so fast."

"Did you just come here to mock me, or do you have a message?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Chrom wanted me to fetch you. He says that Gangrel has woken up."

I stood, pushing my chair back as I did. "Alright," I said, "Tell him I'll be with him in a moment."

Antonio scoffed. "Tell him yourself! I'm not your manservant."

I kneaded my forehead with my knuckles. "Dealing with you is such a trial, Antonio."

“That’s what Flavia says.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Despite myself, I felt a smile tugging at my lips as we left the tent together.

As I pushed open the flap, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head to see Tharja running away, hunched over and attempting to be discrete.

I frowned. “What was she doing outside my tent?”

“Maybe she heard you when you said you wanted scantily-clad women inside your tent,” Antonio suggested, his voice full of humour.

I turned to stare at him. “That was *you* who said that. I don’t want scantily-clad women in my tent.”

Antonio’s eyebrows rose, and then sank down as he assumed a knowing expression. “I see. So you’d prefer some *male* company.” He winked at me.

“That’s not what I meant,” I grumbled.

“Well, I’m not your manservant,” he reminded me, “You’ll need to find another man willing to satisfy your...*urges*.”

I groaned in frustration, and he laughed loudly, drawing the looks of some of the nearby Shepherds. I walked away from him, towards the holding tent where Gangrel was being contained, only for the spy to catch up with me.

“I don’t have time for your shenanigans today,” I told him as he walked behind me. “I’m under a lot of stress at the moment.”

“Well, there are ways of relieving stress, you know.” His tone was sly, and I gave him a quizzical look. “In fact, you could probably do it with Chrom. He looks like a man with a lot of stamina. Although, you two seem rather close. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had already done that sort of thing with him before.”

“Are you trying to imply something again?” I asked him.

“No, I was just saying that you could have a duel with Chrom to let off some steam.”

I shook my head and said, “Chrom doesn’t have time to spar with me whenever he pleases. What about you, Antonio?” I glanced at him. “You seem capable enough.”

“Me?” He raised an eyebrow. “I’m more of lover than a fighter.”

“Is that why you’re ‘the best’?”

“Naturally.”

We reached the holding tent, and I entered as Antonio remained outside. Inside was a single wooden chair, upon which sat King Gangrel of Plegia. He was bound to the chair by a series of ropes. He was now, fortunately enough, garbed in drab, grey clothes. Surrounding him was Chrom, Basilio and Flavia, who were all staring down at the Mad King with looks of intense dislike.

Chrom looked over as I entered. “Good, you’re here. Now the interrogation can finally begin.”

Gangrel cackled maliciously. “Is *that* what this is? An *interrogation*? My, my, that’s an awfully

nasty word for a dandy little prince such as you to be using. How low the Ylisseean royalty have sunk.”

Chrom smiled coldly. “Would you rather I left it to the khans instead?” He nodded to the two Feroxi, who cracked their knuckles menacingly.

“Be warned, *Mongrel*,” Flavia snarled, “I don’t play fair.”

Gangrel giggled nervously. “Do you want me to talk?”

Basilio rolled his eyes. “I’ve heard enough *talk* from you already. What we want is justice.”

Gangrel’s face was twisted by a mocking sneer. “What a precious little word: ‘justice’. You’ve grown soft, Fat-Khan. Too much time spent around blue-haired royals, I’d wager.”

With a signal from Chrom, Basilio stepped forwards and swung a massive fist at the Mad King, whose head snapped back. When he brought his head back down again, his cracked lips parted and revealed a bloodied grin.

“Such dirty tactics from such a dirty-skinned beast. Filth,” Gangrel spat, prompting Basilio to punch him again. Even though I clearly saw a tooth being knocked out of his mouth, the Mad King let out another insane cackle.

“Enough, Basilio,” I ordered. “I don’t think pain is going to convince him to talk. We need to find another approach.”

Gangrel’s head swivelled to look at me. “Ah, so here is the famous Ylisseean tactician. And so young, too. I bet you’ve never even lain with a woman before, have you boy?” He burst out laughing upon seeing my disgruntled expression. “*This* is the genius that laid waste to my brilliant strategies? So timid, so pathetic. He looks like one of the little prince’s bed slaves!”

“Basilio,” I said, as calmly as I could, “I’ve changed my mind. Let Flavia have a turn.”

Basilio nodded, and stepped back from the wooden chair. Flavia advanced towards the Plegian king, and delivered a swift kick to his abdomen.

“I never expected such ruthless tactics from you Ylisseeans,” Gangrel commented, as soon as he could breathe again. “Have I done something to offend you?”

Chrom snarled. “You bastard! You know exactly what you did! You had Emmeryn murdered in cold blood!”

An odd expression passed over the Mad King’s face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

This time, it was Chrom himself who stepped forward and struck Gangrel across the face. He then grabbed the king by the front of his shirt and pulled him in close, eyes burning with anger. “How dare you?” he hissed. “You would deny killing the exalt after everything you’ve done?! You disgusting piece of vermin!”

But the expression remained on Gangrel’s face. Was it sincerity? “Listen to what I’m telling you, little prince. I did not give the order to murder the exalt.”

I scoffed. “Right. Do you expect us to believe that? You can’t deny that you had the motive. You sent your lackeys to fetch the Fire Emblem from Ylissstol, and to kill the exalt in the process, in order to throw the halidom into a panic.”

“They were after the Emblem?” Gangrel hissed, now looking truly bewildered. “But how...who could have...?” His eyes narrowed. “Aversa.” He spat out the name with contempt. “This was *her* doing, I know it.”

Chrom relaxed his grip on the king. “I thought she was your subordinate?”

“She *is*,” Gangrel insisted. “Or so I thought. However, I began to suspect that she may have been a spy from the Grimleal. I tried to keep her close, but she slipped away just before you guttersnipes arrived.”

“Perhaps the Plegians aren’t as organised as we thought,” Flavia commented.

I could see the confusion etched on Chrom’s face. “So you truly had no intent of killing Emmeryn?”

A ghastly smile appeared on the Plegian king’s face. “Well, I wouldn’t say *that*. In fact, I had a plan to kidnap her from her dainty, little palace and bring her here to Plegia, where she would be executed for her crimes against my beloved nation. It was to be my *coup de grâce*! Once their pitiful exalt had been slaughtered on Plegian soil, those Ylisseans fools would have been spiritually crushed. And then we would take our armies and crush them...*literally*!” He let out a maniacal laugh that must have been audible all around the camp.

Chrom let go of the Mad King, and he rocked back and forward in his chair, still laughing insanely.

I shook my head in disgust. “You see, Chrom? Even if this madman didn’t have your sister killed, he’s still a violent and dangerous tyrant. He *deserves* this and everything that’s coming to him.”

Chrom looked deep into my eyes, and I saw that I had convinced him. “Very well. We must make preparations for the arrival of the Plegian army. It won’t be long before they discover our location.”

And with that, he left the tent. Basilio gave me a nod as he, too, departed. Flavia gave one last contemptuous glare at Gangrel before she also left. The interrogation was over. I was alone with the psychopath.

The Plegian king had ceased his diabolical laughter, although he was still occasionally letting out a sick giggle in his madness. He eventually collected himself enough to say, “I saw that, by the way. Very insidious of you.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“You manipulated that blue-haired imbecile almost masterfully. He was considering letting me go when he found out that I didn’t have the exalt killed. Perhaps you *are* as great as they say, tactician.”

“I don’t claim to be a saint, but someone had to take action. I only did what I had to do. For Chrom’s own good.”

Gangrel smirked. “You hide behind your innocent face and pretty little excuses, but inside, you’re just as sick and twisted as me.”

I shrugged. “You may be right. Perhaps it’s my Plegian blood?”

Gangrel raised an eyebrow, and I pulled off the glove I had used to cover my right hand and the marking it bore, displaying the strange design to the Mad King.

For the first time, Gangrel looked honestly stunned. “I see. So that’s how it is. Why do you show this to me?”

“It’s not like anyone will believe you if you tell them. And you probably won’t get a chance to, anyway. Your execution is nigh, King Gangrel.”

His eyes widened slightly. “Execution? You would do unto me as I would have done unto your precious exalt?”

“As I have said, I don’t claim to be a saint. Your death will bring an end to this war, and that’s all that matters.”

“Do you know the significance of that symbol, boy?”

“It’s the Mark of Grima, the emblem of the Grimleal.” My research on the subject had borne fruit.

“But do you know what that means for *you*?” He snickered. “No, I wouldn’t imagine you do. You think that this war and your troubles are nearly over, but you have a lifetime of strife and misery to look forward to.”

I smiled, and leaned in close to the king’s face. “And all *you* have to look forward to is a sharp blade upon the back of your neck. Farewell, King Gangrel.”

As I left the holding tent and began the long walk back to my own tent, all of my bravado and confidence seemed to drain away, only to be replaced by the horror and guilt at the way I had acted, the things I had said. Had I really been so cold? Had I really manipulated Chrom, my closest friend, who trusted me so deeply? I felt sickened. It wasn’t just today, either: I had been acting rather immoral over the last few weeks, as the war dragged on. What had happened to me? Where was all this malice coming from? I hastily covered the Mark of Grima that blazed on the back of my hand, pulling my glove on over my fingers. It wouldn’t do for anyone else to see it.

That evening, all of the Shepherds and many of the Feroxi gathered in a great circle around the campfire, in the centre of the camp. As many of them as there were, their restless chatter could not pierce through the din inside my skull. Too many things were happening at once. The war was reaching a turning point, and the balance was extremely delicate. We had the king, and the Plegians would soon be coming to his rescue. Any false moves and the war would only escalate further. But the way I had acted in the holding tent earlier still haunted me. I barely even noticed when Chrom stood up from his seat in the circle and began to speak.

“My friends,” he said, “this dreaded war is coming to an end. I thank you for your valour and patience over these last few, long weeks. The Plegian king is ours, and soon his people will come searching for us. We must be prepared to fight, should it come to that. Our tactician has devised a plan.” He gestured to me. “Robin, if you would explain?”

I stood, and felt the immense pressure of all of the eyes in camp watching me. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before. At that moment, I knew what I had to do.

“Everyone,” I began, “I *would* like to give you all the details of the plan. But first, I must say a few words.” I took a deep breath. “I haven’t been a Shepherd for very long, which is why I was so surprised when you were all so willing to place your trust in me. But I have misled you all, and for that, I am truly sorry.”

I saw many of the gathered people begin to frown, most of all Chrom. But somewhere in the crowd, I caught a glimpse of Henry. He was smiling so brightly, and so genuinely, that it reassured me in my decision.

“I once told some of you about my life before joining the Shepherds: that I lived alone with my mother in a small house in Southern Ylisse. However, the truth is that, before we lived in that house, we had fled from another land. That land was this one. I am a Plegian by birth.”

I was expecting shocked whispers, maybe even gasps at this revelation. Instead, all I got were mildly surprised glances.

I pressed on, convinced that they hadn’t grasped the full meaning of my words. “And what’s more, I have reason to believe that my parents were high-ranking members of the Grimleal. If I hadn’t been taken from here as a child, it could have been me facing you in battle today. The fact of the matter is that I’ve lied to you all. Given that, I wouldn’t be surprised if you lost your trust in me.”

All I could hear around me were sighs and disbelieving mutters. I could see Chrom shaking his head disapprovingly. He crossed the circle, walking purposefully towards me.

Fear rose up within me. “Chrom,” I began, but then he was standing before me with that same look of disapproval.

“Robin,” he said, “did you *really* think we would stop trusting you just because you were born in Plegia?”

I felt my face heat up. “But...I lied to you. After you brought me in and treated me like one of your own. I don’t *deserve* your trust.”

“Just because you were born in another country doesn’t make you any different from the person you were five minutes ago. You’re my *friend*, Robin.”

I was moved by his words, and there were cries from the surrounding Shepherds that echoed Chrom’s speech.

“Damn straight! The Vaike doesn’t care *where* you’re from, Robin!”

“We are all hiding secrets, no? Even my great self has some things he would rather not share. But you, Robin, show bravery in the face of despair! I commend thee!”

“Hear hear, dear Virion. I always knew you were courageous, Robin. After all, I am an *excellent* judge of character.”

“Looks like you’ve got folks you depend on you, Bubbles. Can’t say I’m not jealous.”

All these and more showed their appreciation for me vocally, and I swelled with pride at their words.

I heard Lissa pipe up from somewhere nearby. “You’ve changed, Chrom. If Robin had told you that he was Plegian when you first met him, you probably would’ve skewered him.”

I gulped, pride vanishing, but the laughter of the Shepherds around me was contagious, and I couldn’t help but join in.

Chrom dismissed his sister’s comment with a wave of his hand. “That’s an exaggeration. But if I *have* changed, it’s because of you, Robin. You were the one who told me that I was worthy of

Emmeryn's ideals, and you gave me the strength to carry on when everything seemed hopeless." His face seemed to burn a reddish tinge when he said, "Truth be told, Robin, I don't know where I'd be right now if it weren't for you."

I smiled. "I could say the same to you."

I heard someone in the crowd clear their throat, and we stepped away from each other, embarrassed. I could swear I was blushing bright red.

"Now," Chrom said, with a broad grin on his face, "about that plan?"

I nodded. "Right."

It wasn't until the next morning that our scouts reported in that the Plegian army was on the move towards our position. Everyone in camp scrambled into their positions to greet the oncoming troops, as discussed previously. Our goal was to end this war here and now, without any conflict. If fate was on our side, only one man would need to die today...

We met with the Plegians a few miles away from the campsite. I was at the head of the welcoming party, with Stahl and Sully at either side of me, and accompanied by a troupe of Feroxi soldiers. Chrom had remained behind in the camp. As we drew close, I could begin to make out the features of the Plegian leaders. At the extreme front of the marching army was a tall, bald man with a thick brown beard. He was dressed in the garb of a Berserker that left his broad chest exposed, revealing a series of scars that marked him out as a veteran warrior. Just as the man approached, there was a vicious screeching sound from above, and a shadow passed over our heads. We all looked up, as one, to see a massive, winged lizard come swooping down from the sky. Sully cursed, and drew her weapon, but Stahl shook his head, warning her. The great lizard, a wyvern, flew over our heads and landed next to the Berserker. On the wyvern's back was a younger man, with sharp eyes and a scraggly, unshaven look. He grinned at us as he dismounted, and he ignored the glare he was receiving from the bearded man.

The Berserker spoke, in a voice that was surprisingly soft and low, "Well met, Ylisseans. I am General Mustafa of the Plegian Army."

"And I am Robin, Royal Tactician of the Shepherds. Shall we begin the parley?"

The Wyvern Rider barked a laugh. "Parley?! *You're* the ones who stole our king away! Why shouldn't we just charge in and take him back ourselves?" He raised his axe in vicious triumph, inciting a cheer from some of the crowd behind him, mostly his fellow Wyvern Riders. But I noticed that many of the soldiers had remained silent.

Mustafa regarded the other man with cool contempt. "Be silent, Captain Vasto. We are here to negotiate, not to do battle with these Ylisseans."

The man called Vasto snarled, but held his tongue for the moment.

"Now then," I said, "I will admit that we are holding King Gangrel of Plegia captive for war crimes he has committed against the halidom of Ylisse. But we hold no resentment towards the people of Plegia for what the Mad King has done."

Mustafa shook his head. "The king and his kingdom are not separate entities, Sir Robin. The king must take full responsibility for the actions of his people, and vice versa."

"I agree," I said. "But is that truly what King Gangrel believes? Our information has proven that His Majesty was sending bloodthirsty brigands into both Ylisse and Regna Ferox with the intent of committing mass destruction. And yet, when we confronted the king on this matter, he denied all knowledge of this crime. How can the people take responsibility for their king's actions when the king does not do so for his own people's actions? How can there be trust between the king and his kingdom with such an unbalanced relationship?"

Mustafa paused, and the silence fell heavily over the gathered Plegians.

But Vasto quickly intervened. "What right have you to speak to us? You are not the ruler of Ylisse. You're just a sweet, little messenger dove from the yellow-bellied prince! You have no power here!"

Sully's hand went to her sword again, but I held my hand up in a fist and she halted. My gesture was mirrored by Mustafa, silencing Vasto once again.

"You must forgive me subordinate, Sir Robin," Mustafa apologised. "He is impulsive and quick-tempered. He shall be disciplined accordingly."

I shook my head. "There is no need. The Captain's words ring true." I turned to Stahl, who reached down and helped me up onto the back of his horse. "Come," I called to the Plegians, "I will take you to Prince Chrom."

Fortunately, the sands in this region of the desert were shallow and course, and so they did not impede our return to camp via horseback. The Plegians followed behind in strict silence. Judging by their attitudes compared to my previous encounters with Plegian soldiers, General Mustafa commanded much respect from his men. This could be used to our advantage, given what I knew of Mustafa's relationship with the Mad King.

When we arrived back at the camp, the tents had been moved, and a pathway was constructed that lead into the centre of camp. With the Plegians following behind me, I felt almost as though I was leading a funeral procession. In the centre of the camp was Chrom, accompanied by several stone-faced Feroxi soldiers. In between the gathered Feroxi men, kneeling on the ground, was Gangrel. His arms were bound behind his back, and he was also gagged.

The General stepped forwards. "I am General Mustafa. You must be Prince Chrom."

Chrom spoke. "You have my gratitude for agreeing to negotiate with us, General."

Vasto was furious. "What is the meaning of this?! You want us to barter and trade for our own *king*? What kind of spineless dogs do you take us for?"

Chrom held his hands up for peace. "I assure you, I mean no offence. But first, I must ask you all something important: do you really want Gangrel as your king? By all accounts, he is a tyrant who abuses the power he holds over his subordinates. He dragged your people into a terrible war, without any regard for the wellbeing of his kingdom."

Mustafa looked grave, but said, "That was not merely the *king's* will. Lest you forget, Ylisse once waged war against *us* for our 'blaspheming ways'. The people of Plegia do not forget such transgressions so easily."

Chrom bowed his head. "I remember. The war was a tragedy, and the responsibility weighs heavily on me, as it did my sister. I know - we *all* know - that the scars will take some time to heal. But King Gangrel only seeks to open those wounds anew. We are beyond such barbaric methods as war. Ours should be an era of peace."

Vasto spat. "Listen to him. He admits his country's guilt in starting a war, and yet he preaches to us about peace?!"

Chrom decided to ignore Vasto's bitter words. "King Gangrel," he said, "is unfit to rule your proud kingdom."

There were mutterings from the gathered army, and Mustafa said, "That is *our* decision to make, Prince Chrom. Not yours, or any other outsider's, as well their intentions may be."

Chrom nodded. "I understand. But let me ask you, General Mustafa. Is it true that King Gangrel threatened to have your own family murdered if you did not comply with his orders during the war?"

The General's eyes widened, and I knew that Antonio's information had been correct. There were further shocked mutterings from the Plegians.

"Does this action not befit a tyrant?" Chrom asked, his voice raised.

Mustafa looked ashamed. "I will not deny this accusation."

Vasto seethed, as voices in the Plegian army began to rise.

"And what's more," Chrom cried, "we have reason to believe that he was placing many of his other subordinates in similar positions."

Vasto grinned. "Oho! Do you hear how he speaks? 'We have *reason* to believe'! But, little prince, do you have any *proof*?"

But Chrom didn't need proof. He had undermined Mustafa's position by revealing Gangrel's hold over the General. The Plegian soldiers were beginning to lose faith in their king.

"I *do* have proof," Chrom went on, "that King Gangrel wished to steal the Fire Emblem, Ylisse's national treasure. Tell me; is *that* the will of Plegia? Or is it just one man, wishing to fuel his own insipid desires?"

"Both of our beautiful nations are still recovering from that blasted war caused by my father. And this man," he pointed to Gangrel, who was still kneeling on the ground behind him, "would have us make war once again, in order to satisfy his own ambitions. Imagine the benefits peace could have for your people. We could trade, and share our cultures without fear of conflict or strife. Gangrel is the enemy of peace. And thus, Gangrel is the enemy of Ylisse. But is he the enemy of Plegia?"

The ultimate question rang out, loud and clear, for every man and woman to hear. The silence that followed was punctuated by someone in the crowd shouting, "Down with Gangrel!"

I smiled. The voice had sounded oddly like Antonio.

Other voices rose up. I heard Gaius cry, "Death to the tyrant!"

"He's our enemy, too!" That one was Anna.

But now more people were shouting, and they weren't cleverly-placed Shepherds. The Plegians were rising up against Gangrel. Vasto was trying his best to turn them all back against Chrom, but his words were being drowned out by the rising tumult.

Chrom turned, and signalled for Gangrel to be brought forward. The Mad King was grabbed by

both arms, hauled up to his feet and practically dragged forward. A large, stone block had been placed in front of Chrom, and Gangrel was dropped behind it, on his knees.

Chrom drew Falchion, which gleamed brightly in the desert sun. "I would put an end to this war here and now, with a single stroke." He turned to face the crowd, his face filled with determination, and he roared, "I would give this Mad King the justice he deserves! Is that the will of Plegia?!"

The answering cry could be heard in the Plegian capital. The soldiers were bellowing, stamping their feet and banging their shields, calling out for Gangrel's head.

The Mad King's back was forced down, until his neck was atop the wooden block. Chrom stepped up, blade raised.

"Do you have any final words, *King Gangrel*?" he asked.

The gag had been removed, and Gangrel was free to speak once more. He looked out at the crowd of men whom he had once held power over, and who were now screaming for his execution. He laughed. It was a shrill, piercing sound that silenced the roaring of the mob. It went on and on, until the king was gasping for air. His final words, when they came, were slurred in his madness.

"I can see it so clearly now, little prince! You, me, *all* of you, we're all just puppets dancing on strings! Eternally damned by fate and by the gods we worshipped! And now a storm is coming that will tear you all apart! The end is nigh! All of you are fools, I say! *Fools!*"

Chrom raised Falchion over his head as Gangrel began to laugh once more, and the jeering and roaring of the crowd rose higher and higher, swirling up into the desert air, until the blade was brought down with a sickening *thud*.

The Mad King's head, no longer connected to his neck, fell to the sands below. The ghost of his last laugh was frozen on his twisted face, and so it would be forevermore.

Chapter 16

The war was over. Chrom had said so himself. Most of the Plegians had been converted to Chrom's way of thinking and were glad be rid of the Mad King. Those who weren't had lost all of their morale once Gangrel had been executed. Either way, the battles had ended once and for all.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, I was approached by Antonio. He had his characteristic smirk plastered across his face, and he applauded slowly as he drew near.

"Very well done, Robin. You managed to turn the tide of the war and strike the final blow in less than a day!"

"It wasn't just me," I protested. "Without Chrom, or you, or any of the others, we could never have pulled it off."

But Antonio shook his head. "That doesn't matter. You're the tactician who brought the whole plan together, and that's what history will remember."

"I don't give a damn about what history will think of me."

"What *do* you give a damn about, Robin?"

I yawned. "Right now, I just want to sleep."

"That's a good idea. You'll need to be well-rested for the party this evening."

I frowned at him. "What party?"

He wrapped an arm around my shoulder as he spoke. "There's going to be a massive party tonight to celebrate the end of the war. There'll be music, dancing, and plenty of drink and girls to go around. Hell, we might even invite some of those Plegians."

I shrugged out of his grip. "Thanks, but that doesn't sound like something I'd enjoy."

"Well, you don't have a choice. If you don't come, Basilio will drag you out of your tent. He takes his parties as seriously as he does his battles."

I groaned. "Fine. I'll come along. Gods know I need to have a bit of fun."

"That's the spirit," he said. Suddenly, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I have to go. Duty calls and I'm needed elsewhere."

I nodded, and he turned and sprinted away.

I took to wandering around the camp, deciding to speak with some of the Shepherds before I turned in. As I reached the centre of camp, where Gangrel had been executed, I found Flavia and Basilio speaking with Chrom.

The East-Khan was talking. "...Once their messenger delivers our terms, that's it. We put an end to this bloody business, once and for all."

I heard Chrom breathe a sigh of relief. "We've won. But, somehow, I don't feel like celebrating."

“Victory can be bitter as well as sweet, boy,” Basilio said, in his deep, powerful voice. “It’s good you learn that now.”

“It’s strange,” Chrom said. “The war only lasted a few weeks, but I feel as though we’ve been fighting for much longer.”

“War is hell, lad. It takes its toll on us all.” The West-Khan’s face suddenly split into a massive grin. “But now, we can put all that behind us! The celebrations begin tonight, and I owe you and your tactician friend a drink.”

Flavia caught my eye as I approached. “Speaking of which…”

Basilio grinned even more broadly when he saw me. Before I could protest, he picked me up in his massive arms and wrapped me in a bear hug. My bones ached and cracked as the great khan squeezed my body. I could hear Chrom and Flavia’s laughter as the blood pounded in my ears. Just before I was about to pass out, the pressure eased and I was dropped to the ground, with black spots dancing in front of my eyes.

Basilio was roaring something in my ear. “Robin, you mad dog! You brave, little genius! You’ve saved us all.”

“Oaf!” I heard Flavia exclaim, but her voice was filled with humour. “Think of what would have happened if you had squeezed the life from Ylisse’s prime tactician.”

“Ah, quit your nagging,” Basilio grumbled. “At least for today.”

Flavia drew herself up to her fullest height. “I am Khan-Regnant, you fool! Speak to me like that again, and I shall have your bald head cut from your shoulders.”

Basilio rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Flavia using death threats, huh? Reminds me of the night we first met. And the morning after!” Basilio laughed uproariously as Flavia, to my surprise, turned a bright shade of red.

“Oaf!” she cried again, giving the big man a shove that sent him stumbling backwards several feet.

I saw Chrom grinning. “You never told me that story, Basilio.”

“Me neither,” I muttered, feeling a similar grin spread across my own face.

“Well,” said Basilio, “it’s not exactly an appropriate story that I can tell to young folks like you two. Not without a few pints of mead in me, at least.” He chuckled. “Wait ‘til tonight, then I’ll have plenty of stories to tell.”

“If there’s one good thing you can say about Basilio,” Flavia muttered, “it’s that he knows how to spin a good tale.”

“I can’t wait to hear them,” I said.

Chrom looked at me. “You’re coming to the celebration?”

“I was told that if I stayed in my tent, Basilio here would drag me out.”

The West-Khan nodded. “Damn right, I would. Chances are, I’ll have to do the same to Lon’qu, too.”

“So, I’m afraid I don’t have a choice,” I finished. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sumia

approaching our little group, with a look of determination on her face.

“You’ll enjoy it,” Basilio promised me. “We’re bringing in the finest meads and barley wines from Ferox, thanks to Anna.”

“Couldn’t this wait until we were back in Ylisse?” Chrom asked, just as Sumia joined us. Without saying a word, she grabbed Chrom by the shoulders and pulled him into a deep kiss. Chrom was taken aback by her boldness at first, but he slowly relaxed and tenderly pulled Sumia closer, closing his eyes as he did.

“Couldn’t *this* wait until we were back in Ylisse?” I muttered, loud enough for the couple to hear me. They broke apart and had the decency to look embarrassed.

Basilio sighed wistfully. “There’s nothing quite as beautiful as young love,” he said.

Flavia raised an eyebrow. “‘Love’ isn’t the word I would have used.”

Chrom bend down a bit, and whispered something into Sumia’s ear. She blushed, before nodding quickly. She turned and left, not looking back as she walked in the direction of Chrom’s tent.

The prince cleared his throat. “Right. Well, I want you both to know that the halidom owes a great debt of gratitude to Regna Ferox.”

Both khans shook their heads simultaneously. “There’s no need to extend such thanks,” Flavia said. “As long as you return to fight for me in the next tournament, we’re even.”

“And if you lose that tournament, *I’ll owe you* a debt!” Basilio laughed loudly.

Chrom bowed. “My thanks, East and West-Khans.”

The khans nodded and left us, going off to prepare for the evening’s festivities. I was left alone with Chrom.

He looked at me, with an expression of deep trust. “I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done.”

I scratched the back of my neck, unable to meet his eye. “Truth be told, Chrom, it doesn’t feel like I did much at all. You were the one who turned the mob against Gangrel. You’re the one who deserves all the accolades.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Cheer up, Robin,” he said. “The war is over.” He hesitated. “Granted, I didn’t think it would end like *this*...”

I finally looked up at him. “You did the right thing. You saw what Gangrel was really like. He was too dangerous to be kept alive. Emmeryn would be proud.”

He smiled. “Thanks, Robin. You’re always there when I need a hand.”

“And you’re always there for me, Chrom.”

“I guess we really are two halves of the same whole,” he mused.

“Then, what does that make Sumia?” I asked, feeling a smile tug at my lips.

He winced. “I nearly forgot.” He looked over his shoulder, and when he turned to face me, his face was tinged with red. “I...have to go. Back to my bed.” He grew even more flustered. “Er, that is, my tent- I mean, er...”

I suppressed a grin. “Go on. I’ll talk to you again, later. We’ve got a long night of celebrations ahead.”

He nodded, still blushing furiously. He turned and walked away, heading back towards his tent.

I sighed, muttering to myself. “The leader of an entire nation, and yet he still blushes like a maid when he’s faced with matters of romance.”

“As though you’re any different.”

I shook my head. “I’m a tactician, not an exalt. There’s quite a big difference.”

Perhaps the fact that I was talking to myself should have been a sign, or an omen. But too much was happening that day for me to concern myself with my own problems.

Not long after Chrom had departed, I found Lissa, with Lon’qu trailing somewhat closely behind her.

“Hey there, Robin!” the princess exclaimed upon seeing me.

“Hello, Lissa. Lon’qu.” I nodded to the Feroxi warrior, who returned the gesture in his usual, curt manner.

“I bet you’re glad the war’s over now, right?”

“I’m overjoyed,” I replied. “How’s everything with you?”

“It’s good.” She eyed the Feroxi man. “But *this* guy keeps following me around. The fighting’s over, Lon’qu, you don’t need to be my bodyguard anymore.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Lon’qu is your bodyguard? This was Chrom’s idea, I take it?”

“It sure was. Honestly, I thought having a big, strapping, young and handsome warrior follow me everywhere would be such a great idea. But he’s such a stick-in-the-mud! He won’t let me wander too far away, or stray too close. He just stands there and looks dour. I swear, it’s like having another Frederick around.”

“And what about you, Lon’qu?” I asked. “Do you mind having to follow Lissa around all the time?”

“...My feelings on this subject don’t matter.”

“I thought you might say that. Will you join me for a drink later?”

I thought I saw him smile. “...Perhaps.”

Lissa sidled up next to him. “And what about *me*, hmm? Will you come have a drink with me?”

The dark-haired man grimaced and Lissa sighed. “Fine. Forget I asked.”

The two of them moved off again, with one still following the other doggedly.

“I’m starting to think Basilio was right about young love,” I muttered.

I began the march back to my tent, doubting I would ever reach it at this point. Everywhere I went, people were congratulating me, shaking my hand or pulling me into group hugs. I

appreciated their kindness, but it grew tiring all the same; I have always been an introvert.

Near the stables, I found Sully and Stahl. They both exclaimed when they saw me, clamouring to shake my hand and give their thanks.

“You were really something else, Robin!” Stahl said.

“Yeah!” Sully nodded in agreement. “You showed those Plegians who’s boss! Didn’t even have to draw your sword to do it, too!”

I smiled modestly at them. “Thanks, but I’m just glad it’s all over. I need to have a lie down.” I barely suppressed a yawn. “What are you two going to do, now that the fighting’s done?”

Stahl looked at Sully out of the corner of his eye. “Right now, I think I want to have a sparring match with my partner.”

I slumped in disbelief. “Really? But...the war’s finished. Surely you can take a break from training just for one day?”

But the two cavaliers had identical smiles fixed on their faces as they looked at each other.

Sully walked over to the green-armoured man. “I think Stahl had a different kind of ‘sparring’ in mind.”

And before my eyes, she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him, in a surprisingly tender manner.

I groaned. “Right. Don’t let me interrupt, then.” I left before things became more heated between the cavalier pair. Was this the effect victory had on people?

I was rubbing my forehead gently as I walked, prompting a voice to call out, “Something troubling you, Bubbles?”

I glanced in the direction the voice had come from to see Gaius, sitting on a crate outside his tent. Lying next to him on the crate was some sort of fur coat. Gaius was, naturally, chewing a piece of liquorice, and he waved to me as I approached.

“I’m alright, Gaius,” I told him.

His eyebrows rose. “Really? ‘Cos you look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“Not a ghost: just Sully and Stahl being uncomfortably close with each other. And Chrom and Sumia before them.” I shook my head. “What is it about winning a war that causes people to turn into beasts in heat?”

Gaius shrugged. “I expect they’re just glad to be alive, Bubbles.” His eyes lit up as he had an idea. “Speaking of beasts in heat...” He gave the thing that I had assumed to be a fur coat a sharp poke in the side, and it sat up. Panne blinked.

“Hey, Whiskers, how would you like a round in the sack with ol’ Gaius?” He winked at her.

But his joking manner was lost on her. “If you are suggesting that we copulate, be warned: we taguel mate for life.”

The thief whitened. I left them to sort out their differences, but I mostly didn’t want them to notice my growing irritation.

I finally returned to my tent, feeling sorry for myself. I knew I was being ridiculous. I didn't want someone to share my bed with; I was just jealous of what my companions had. All I *really* wanted was a rest.

But when I opened the flap at the front of my tent, I was greeted by none other than Tharja.

She smiled as I entered. "Hello, Robin."

I blinked. "Er...hello."

She walked towards me, slowly, with each movement she made emphasising her legs and her hips.

"I've been...expecting you," she whispered.

"Well...this *is* my tent," I mumbled.

Her smile widened, displaying her teeth. "I imagine you must be very tired after all your hard work. Maybe you should take a break."

I found myself nodding. "Yeah, that sounds great."

She moved closer. "And I expect you'll want some company. It's so lonely in here."

"Yeah...lonely..."

She was very close now. I could feel her body warm against mine. "And so...dark. There's hardly any light at all."

I mumbled something incoherent.

Her face drew closer and closer. "Just the way I like it," she breathed. Her lips brushed against mine softly. And then the moment had passed, and she stepped away from me.

"We could do whatever we wanted in here. No one would ever know."

I found myself unable to speak.

"I'll be at the celebration tonight. Think about it," she said, smiling seductively as she walked past me and out of the tent. Her hips swayed with every step, and my eyes followed her as she left.

I must have stood there, looking at the tent entrance for a few minutes before I muttered, "Gods above..."

As the sun set, torches began lighting all around the camp. Reds, blues, greens and more: ornamental lights from around the continent. The festivities had begun.

True to his word, Basilio came around to rope me into the party. I convinced the khan that I was able to leave the tent by myself, and I went off looking for Chrom.

I found him sitting with Sumia, Lissa and Vaike at a table. Before I had even sat down, I had smelled the alcohol off of Vaike's breath.

“Robin!” he roared when he saw me, banging his mug against the table. “You little punk, you! Gimme an arm-wrestle!”

I pulled myself a chair. “Maybe later, ‘Teach’,” I replied, feeling Sumia and Lissa’s amused stares. I leaned over and muttered to the brunette, “The party only started an hour ago. How did Vaike get so drunk so fast?”

She giggled. “He challenged Chrom to a drinking match.”

Chrom glanced over and said, “I gave him a head-start.”

I grinned as Vaike let out a loud hiccup.

“I may have lost this battle,” Vaike slurred, “but the war rages on!”

And with that, he stood up and wobbled away to challenge someone else.

Lissa was impressed. “I think that’s one of the only times I’ve heard him refer to himself in the first-person.”

“Same here,” I commented.

Suddenly a massive tankard, filled to the brim with a dark, foamy liquid, was slammed down on the table in front of me.

I blinked. “For me?”

“Who else?” a deep voice boomed from above me. There was a clatter of a chair being pulled up, and then Basilio sat down beside me. With him was a familiar myrmidon, who looked typically sour-faced as he nursed his own mug of beer.

“Lon’qu!” Lissa exclaimed happily upon seeing him.

Basilio chuckled. “This one thought he could escape the party by hiding in his tent. Not on my watch!”

I bent down close to the tankard, smelling the fumes from the beer within. “Is this ale?” I asked, frowning.

“It sure is! Freshly brewed from Western Feroxi barley.” He drank from his own tankard, filled with the same substance. “Ahh...tastes of home, so it does.”

I gave the drink another whiff, and received a clap on the back from the big khan, sending me face-first into the tankard.

“Drink with your *mouth*, Robin!” he cried. “Not with your nose!”

I pulled myself out of the drink, causing those sitting around the table to laugh when they saw my foam-covered face.

“Go on, Robin,” I heard Chrom say. “Down the hatch!”

The others began cheering me on, telling me to drink. I gazed warily at the ale-filled tankard, before bringing it unsteadily to my lips. I swallowed two mouthfuls of the stuff before setting the tankard down, to a small round of applause. I gasped. The ale was stronger than any of the beers I had tasted. Which, truthfully, wasn’t very many.

“And you want me to drink *all* of it?!” I choked.

Basilio laughed. “Is Ylisse’s mighty tactician afraid of a mug of ale?”

“You could always let *me* have some, Robin.” Lissa stretched across the table, reaching for my tankard, only to have her hands slapped away by Chrom.

“Oh, no, he won’t,” Chrom insisted.

“Aw, come on! *Please*, Chrom?”

“You’ll thank me tomorrow morning,” he advised her.

Lissa stood up and walked over to where Lon’qu was sitting, as haughtily as she could. She sat down next to the Feroxi warrior, and began to converse with him. The myrmidon now seemed relatively comfortable around the princess. Perhaps that was the effect the alcohol had had on him?

I felt one of Basilio’s massive hands slapping me on the back again. “Well, Robin, you did it. You beat those Plegians at their own game. I’m proud of you, boy!”

I smiled. “Thanks, Basilio.”

He scoffed. “If you were *really* thankful, you’d down that ale without flinching.”

I winced, taking another look at the tankard. Despite my two mouthfuls of the liquid, it was still practically overflowing. Fortunately, no one other than Basilio was watching me. I brought the tankard up to my mouth and drank deep.

“One more sip!” the high-pitched voice hissed from next to me.

“No way!” I said, suppressing a giggle. “Your brother will kill me!”

I glanced over at Chrom, who was currently pre-occupied with Sumia. I grinned and muttered, “Oh, go on, then. One more.”

Lissa took my tankard greedily and drank heavily. I had to pull the mug away from the princess, who let out a most un-royal belch.

“Cheers, Robin!” she slurred, blinking sleepily. I gave her a conspiratorial nod, and she went back over to join Lon’qu. By this point, the myrmidon actually looked happy to see her.

Basilio had left to go and get more ale, leaving me by myself with my nearly-empty tankard. With some help from Lissa, I had managed to almost-entirely drain the massive mug of its contents. My head was noticeably foggy, but it wasn’t a bad feeling. I was eager to consume more ale. Looking around me, I could see everyone was in similar states of intoxication. Even the normally-stoic Lon’qu was smiling and laughing, his face tinged with red, with Lissa sitting beside him, completely inebriated. Vaike had never returned to our table, so I assumed he had fallen into a drunken sleep somewhere. Chrom and Sumia were acting in a manner that they would have been far too embarrassed to do while sober. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Virion and Maribelle sitting at a table for two, sipping wine with ever-present grace. Everyone was enjoying themselves, now that the hurly-burly of war was done.

I turned back to my table, when a voice whispered in my ear.

“Robin.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Tharja standing over me, a small smile playing across her mouth.

“Enjoying yourself?” she asked.

I nodded, unable to help myself from taking the view in. She looked beautiful, even more now than I had ever seen her before.

She reached out her hand, and I took it unquestioningly. She pulled me up out of my chair, and led me away from the table, from the noise and from the other Shepherds.

We found a secluded spot behind a tent, far away from the hustle and bustle of the celebrations. We kissed again, just like we had done earlier. Her breath was warm, and surprisingly sweet. Her body was even warmer, and her skin was so soft. It was intoxicating.

But something stood out in my mind. Perhaps it was a spark of rational thought that had yet to be subdued by the alcohol. And so I opened my mouth and asked her, “Why are you doing this?”

She blinked. “What?”

“We hardly even know each other. *You* barely know me.”

She smiled and moved in close again. “That’s what we’re doing *now*. We’re getting to know each other.”

“But we haven’t really even spoken to each other before. I don’t really know who you are, Tharja.”

She frowned. “What would you like to know?”

“Er...what’s your second name?” The odd question was the first one that popped into my head.

“What is the point of such an inane question?”

“Well, it’s just...doesn’t it seem like we’re moving a bit fast?”

She pressed her body up against mine. I tried to resist enjoying the sensation as she said, “Why should we wait? We are in love, after all.”

“We...*what*?!” I pushed her away, holding her by the shoulders. “What did you say?”

She smiled that little smile of hers. “Don’t try to deny it. When I first locked eyes with you, I thought, ‘He isn’t like the others. He’s the one I’ve been seeking!’ And I know you feel the same way about me.”

“...Right.” My voice sounded about an octave too high.

“That’s why I’ve been watching your every...single...move. Yesterday you read three books and part of a fourth. You snacked on an apple. And last night, you turned over twelve times in your sleep.”

I blanched. “You’ve been watching me *sleep*?!?”

The Dark Mage frowned, looking honestly hurt. "I thought you'd be grateful."

"...I think I need a drink," I muttered. I fled from the scene, ignoring the calls from the girl I had left behind.

My eyes cracked open, and I immediately regretted it. My head was pounding, my stomach was rumbling and my eyeballs had been all but seared by that merest glimpse of sunlight.

"What happened?" I mumbled.

I tried to think back on the night before. I had drunk a full tankard of ale, given to me by Basilio, then I had had a private moment with Tharja. After that, I had had another pint or so of ale, and another type of drink that Gregor had given me. I couldn't remember its name, or even its taste. But everything after that had been a whirl of light and sound. Thinking about it all made my head hurt even more.

Over the next few minutes, I attempted to open my eyes. It was an arduous and painful experience. As my senses came back to me, I felt a heavy weight lying across my feet. To my alarm, I eventually became aware of someone lying next to me. I could feel their body rising and falling slowly, in tempo with their breathing.

I groaned and sat up, blinking heavily. The pain in my skull remained, but at least I could open my eyes. A quick glance to my left revealed my bedmate. It wasn't who I had expected.

I gaped. "*Antonio?*"

The Feroxi man winced, and opened his eyes. "Not so loud," he muttered.

"What are you doing in my bed?" I asked.

"I couldn't find my tent," he explained wearily. "It was late, and everyone had already gone to bed. I found you wandering around, and I followed you here."

"Oh." I relaxed, and lay back down on my pillow, resting my aching head.

The Feroxi man chuckled. "I thought you'd be more concerned at finding another man in your bed after a night of drinking. I was rather looking forward to your reaction, actually. Maybe I should've taken my smallclothes off, too?"

I shrugged. "It's not like anything untoward happened. All the alcohol in Ferox couldn't make me sleep with you, Antonio."

He winced again. "Ouch. You're a bit of a heart-breaker, Robin."

"Tell me about it."

Just then, the weight I had felt on top of my feet shifted and moved. I looked down to see none other than Henry lying on the floor beneath my feet. He was blinking himself awake.

"Oh," I said, "good morning, Henry."

"Mornin', Robin!" he said, bright and cheerful even when hung-over.

“Still haven’t got a tent of your own?” I asked.

“Nope! Imagine my surprise when I stumbled in here a little while ago and found someone else in my spot!”

“Sorry, Henry,” Antonio muttered. “If I’d known you were sleeping in here, I would’ve taken the floor.”

“s alright,” the Dark Mage said nonchalantly. “You fellas looked so peaceful together. I didn’t want to wake you. Nya ha ha!”

I grumbled. “Just wait until this gets out. I’m sure Vaike and Lissa will never let me hear the end of it.”

But, as it turned out, they both had problems of their own. When I eventually emerged from the tent, I found several Shepherds staggering around, shielding their bleary eyes from the early morning sun. One of them was Lissa.

“Good morning!” I said in greeting.

She flinched. “Hi, Robin.”

“Is our little princess feeling under the weather? I knew you’d regret drinking my ale.”

She grumbled, “I only had a few sips! From *your* ale, at least.”

My eyebrows rose. “Did someone else share theirs with you?”

She nodded, resting one hand against her forehead. “Lon’qu let me have some of his beer while Chrom wasn’t looking. Then Virion gave me a small glass of wine. Maribelle did the same. Then Gregor gave me a sip from his hip flask.”

I frowned. “I think you might’ve drunk more than *me*. Just don’t let Chrom see you like this.”

She smiled grimly. “At least Frederick isn’t here.”

I chuckled along with her. Eventually, I excused myself and made my way to the bathing tent. Although the inside of the tent was drab and bare compared to the other tents around the campsite, the warm, steam-filled air was soothing and therapeutic, and I felt myself relaxing for what must have been the first time in ages.

I shrugged out of my cloak, dropping it onto a nearby chair. I pulled off my shirt, trousers and my smallclothes, before grabbing a towel and crossing over to the bathtubs. There were nearly ten bathtubs in the tent, all filled with clean, fresh water at all times. I was perplexed by the presence of the water in the bathtubs that day. After all, where could such clean water be taken from? Was there an oasis nearby? Or perhaps Anna had made some arrangements? Either way, I didn’t complain as I sank into the lukewarm water. I sat back, closed my eyes, and let myself relax.

The war was finally over. We’d all return to Ylisse, and there would probably be another set of celebrations. I knew it wouldn’t be long before Chrom was coronated as the new exalt. Would he still be able to command the Shepherds if he was ruling an entire country? Would there even be a need for the Shepherds, now that peace was guaranteed with Plegia for our time?

I didn’t know what the future held, and so my thoughts turned to the present. Despite her eagerness to be around me, I hadn’t seen Tharja since I had left her side the previous night. I somewhat regretted simply abandoning her in search of a drink, but she had been acting rather

strange...

“She said she loved me,” I whispered. I chuckled and shook my head. “She must be mistaken. Either that, or delusional.”

A thought struck me then. What was it Henry had said about the nature of darkness?

“Darkness is an attractive force.” The memory of that night came flooding back to me.
“Darkness will always seek darkness. It’s kind of like putting two magnets together.”

“Are you trying to say you’re attracted to me?”

“No, no, don’t worry. It’s more like a feeling of respect or awe than physical attraction. Although, let’s face it, I’m not that great with human emotions...”

Maybe that was the case with Tharja? She seemed to be infatuated with me, and I couldn’t deny that I found her attractive. Could the darkness in our hearts have been the cause of her feelings of ‘love’?

And about this ‘darkness’ that Henry sensed in me, what exactly was it? I wasn’t a Dark Mage. Granted, my mother was a practitioner of Dark Magic. From what I could tell, my estranged father might have been, too. But still, even if my parents *were* members of the Grimleal, I shouldn’t have had a substantial amount of darkness lurking inside of me. Certainly not enough to make a Plegian Dark Mage fall in love with me at first sight. And didn’t Henry say that he *wasn’t* attracted to me? He didn’t seem like the type to lie.

“That settles it, then,” I muttered firmly. “She’s delusional. It’s probably for the best if I don’t see her again.”

I knew that I was only running away, like a coward. But I wouldn’t admit it to myself.

I was spared any further contemplation a few minutes later, when the flap at the front of the tent was opened and someone stepped in. Whoever it was, they were quiet, as though they didn’t wish to be discovered.

I craned my neck downwards to see who it was. I saw a ginger-haired thief scanning the inside of the tent furtively, before catching sight of me. He relaxed visibly.

“Hey, Bubbles,” he said.

I nodded in greeting. “Hello, Gaius.”

As I looked closer at him, I saw that his eyes were dark, and his skin was pale. He yawned as he dropped his satchel on the floor. He began to undress and so I tactfully averted my gaze.

“You look tired,” I commented.

“Didn’t get much sleep,” he replied.

I glanced at him as he walked over towards the bathtubs, a towel wrapped around his waist. Something unusual caught my eye.

“Gaius, what’s that?” I pointed, causing his eyes to widen.

“Oh, no.” He craned his neck over his shoulder, trying to examine himself. “I’ve got claw marks on my back, haven’t I?”

"N-no...well, yes, you do. But I was talking about that tattoo on your arm. It's the one they use to mark convicted criminals, isn't it?"

"Oh, that?" He relaxed slightly, dropping the towel as he clambered into one of the tubs. "Yeah, I got caught once doing a favour for a mate. Paid the price," he added. "But, uh, I'd appreciate it if you kept that little nugget under your hat, Bubbles." He winked.

I waved my hand dismissively. "Don't worry. I won't tell any-"

But he didn't seem to hear me. "You'll tell *everyone*, you say?" His eyes narrowed. "So it's to be blackmail, is it? Fine then. I can understand taking an opportunity to line your pockets. You can have my portion of dinner tonight, okay? Will that slake your greed for now?!"

"Gaius, no, wait. I'm not..."

But he cut me off again. "You drive a hard bargain, Bubbles! Very well, I'll throw in a slice of custard pie!"

"No, I mean that I..."

"You want the *whole thing*?! This is highroad robbery! But, I guess I can spare such a delicious pie to ensure your silence."

"Gaius," I said, as firmly as I could, "I don't want any treats from you, all right?! I'll keep your blasted secret!"

He raised his arms in surrender. "Easy there, Bubbles! I can tell *you* had a rough night, too."

I sighed, sinking back down into the tub. "I can handle a rough night or two, every once in a while. But it seems to me like you have a *lifetime* of hardship ahead of you."

Gaius grinned. "Just the way I like it."

"I suppose that means Panne took you up on your offer after all, then?"

"You *bet*, she did! Honestly, I didn't think someone like her would fall for my charms and roguish good looks." He paused, before sitting up to look at me again. "It looks like now you have *another* secret of mine to keep, Bubbles."

I groaned. "Here we go..."

"I guess you'll want two more pies on top of that?"

I was beyond exasperated. "I've already told you a hundred times, I'll keep your secrets! I gave you my word, and that should be the end of it!"

Gaius looked guilty at having provoked me. "Look, I trust you," he admitted. "Honest and truly. It's just that in *my* business, there's no such thing as a free lunch. The fella who says he'll do something for nothing? Well, he's the first one wanting payback down the line!"

I could see where he was coming from. I let out a sigh. "Alright. I was hoping it wouldn't come to this. I have something important to tell you."

He raised an eyebrow. "'Important'?"

"It's a secret. Kind of a private matter. You see..."

I told him about Tharja, and what she had said and done to me the night before.

“Wow,” he muttered, once I had finished. “And I thought *my* love life was hectic.”

“And now you are the only one who knows. Other than myself, of course,” I told him. “So in return for you keeping it safe, I promise to safeguard *your* secret. Do we have a deal?”

He chuckled quietly. “I see what you did there. And...I appreciate it. All right, it’s a deal. But I’m serious about those pies, you know. They don’t stay fresh for too long, and I don’t think that even *I* could finish them all off by myself.”

I peered at him quizzically. “Really? Just how many of those pies do you have?”

He told me.

My jaw dropped. “Gods, Gaius! How do you stay so...?” I gestured to his upper body, which was only partially hidden by the bathwater.

“I’m afraid *that’s* a secret, too.” He grinned.

“I suppose I’m probably better off not knowing,” I grumbled.

Later that afternoon, once everyone had sufficiently recovered, it was time to pack-up and leave. We would be saying goodbye to Anna’s band of merchants, as well as all of the Feroxi bar Lon’qu. It was a lengthy trek back to Ylistol. As I reflected back on our experiences, I realised this would be my second time leaving Plegia for Ylisse. How things had changed since then!

As we started our long journey home, I felt an odd sense of melancholy. Was it because I was departing from my homeland once again? I chided myself, *Ylisse is my homeland now*.

But that sinister voice whispered, from somewhere deep within my soul, “*You have not seen the last of this place. That, I promise you.*”

Despite the heat of the desert sun bearing down on top of me, I shivered.

Chapter 17

Once we arrived back at Ylistol. Frederick and Phila were there at the gates of the city to greet the royal siblings, and the rest of the Shepherds. It was the happiest I had ever seen the Ylislean knight. The four of them marched off to the castle, and the rest of us milled around for a while until we eventually made our way back to the barracks.

The official celebrations to herald the end of the second Ylissee-Plegian War were held a few days after our return to Ylistol. All around the continent, festivals were being thrown as the common people rejoiced at the end of the war. It was a time of peace and happiness for the halidom.

Meanwhile, Chrom had wanted to forswear the title of exalt, out of respect to Emmeryn, but his subjects and advisors all recommended that he fully take on his new role. And so, only a month after Gangrel's death and the war's end, Chrom was crowned the new exalt of Ylissee. After the ceremony, Chrom gave the announcement that he would take Sumia as his wife, to a joyous response from all who attended. Well, *nearly* all. I can still vividly remember the expression of sheer heartbreak and despair on Cordelia's face as she quietly fled the palace hall.

It was less than half a year after the war had ended, and the preparations for the royal wedding were being undertaken. It was to be a grand and lavish occasion, attended by many from around the continent. All of the Shepherds pitched in to help, including myself. Although I was a war tactician and not a wedding planner, Chrom roped me in to organise the ceremony. On the bright side, I was reunited with Basilio, Flavia and Antonio. But, to my horror, I also bumped into Tharja.

Several days before the wedding ceremony, I was having breakfast as usual in the common area of the barracks, when the door opened. I heard Kellam gasp, and I looked up to see the Plegian Dark Mage standing in the doorway. She smiled upon seeing me, and I tried to hide my expression of shock. She strolled over to where I was sitting, not seeing or caring about the dozen pairs of eyes that were watching her.

I stood up to greet her, and she said, "Surprised to see me?"

"...A bit," I answered honestly. "I haven't seen you since the war. Where have you been?" I asked her.

"I stayed in Plegia," she told me. "I thought I didn't have anywhere else to go. But, the longer I stayed, the more I found myself thinking of *you*."

"...Right." I was uncomfortably aware of the stares of my fellow Shepherds, particularly that of Kellam. The young knight, who so rarely exuded any sort of presence, was piercing me with his gaze as I spoke to Tharja. "Could we talk outside, instead?" I asked her.

She nodded, and I led the way out into the city. We walked, side-by-side, through bustling streets and past market stalls and shops. The entire city was getting ready for the royal wedding, and the halidom's citizens were thrilled to be preparing for such a regal occasion.

As we walked together in silence, I noticed Tharja's expression. She seemed at first to be her usual, grumpy self. But she was clutching a Dark tome to her chest and stalking silently down the street, looking downwards and unable to meet anyone's eye. I wasn't used to seeing her look so... vulnerable, I suppose.

"Is everything alright?" I asked her.

"I'm fine," she responded stiffly.

"Are you sure?" When she made no attempt to reply, I went on. "I didn't think royal weddings were your kind of scene. Do you have some ulterior motive for coming here?" If she did, I could probably make a good guess as to what it was.

But she looked into my eyes and smiled. "Do I need a reason to be with the man I love?"

I swallowed nervously. "Right," I muttered. "This again."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Tharja...have you ever actually *been* in love before?"

She fell silent for a moment. "...No. Honestly, I normally couldn't care less about anyone other than myself. Other people are just so...irritating." She tried to backpedal. "N-not like you, Robin. Y-you're so...so..." She seemed to be getting flustered.

"Are you alright?" I asked her.

"I just...I don't know what to do," she mumbled. "I've never been interested in other people before. I don't know how I should act or what I should say..."

I looked at her, saw the misery in her expression, and couldn't help but try to console her. "Just be yourself. If it makes you feel any better, *I've* never been in love before, either."

She blinked. "Really?"

"Y-yeah. I'm still a beginner when it comes to romance, really."

She stepped towards me. "Then we can learn together," she whispered. She flung her arms around my neck and pulled me down into a kiss. Her lips were so soft, so inviting. I brought my hands up around her back, and pulled her closer. She responded enthusiastically, and the kiss deepened.

What am I doing? I pondered as I held her close. *I don't love Tharja.*

"But you desire her. What's so wrong about giving into your urges every once in a while?"

The mysterious, sinister voice was back. Instinctively, I pushed Tharja away. I was glad I did; I suddenly noticed the stares of the people around, in the busy street. I felt extremely self-conscious, and I could tell Tharja did too.

"I...have to go back to the barracks," I blurted. "It's a very important matter."

She nodded shakily. "Fine. I'll see you at the wedding." She gave me one of her mischievous smiles, and then turned to walk away from me. The crowds shifted, and she was lost from view.

I sighed and kneaded my forehead with one hand. How could I have been such a coward towards her? Instead of leading her on like that, I should have just told her how I felt.

"It's because you are weak."

"Shut up!" I snapped, drawing a few more stares from the people who now surrounded me, filling the streets. I stared down at the ground, ashamed, and I walked back to the barracks.

Finally, the big day arrived. I was awoken early by the sound of church bells ringing out across Ylistol, heralding the morning of the royal wedding. Even at this hour of the morning, the barracks were alive with people who were busy preparing for the momentous occasion. So worn out was I from the preparations over the last few weeks that I was almost tempted to skip the ceremony altogether. Alas, I couldn't abandon Chrom in his hour of need, and so I made my way to the cathedral in the centre of the city.

Aside from the palace itself, the Cathedral of Divinity was the most grand and regal building in all of Ylistol. But while the palace was distinctly removed from the rest of the capital, the cathedral functioned as the centrepiece of the great city, mingling with the lesser buildings that the palace deemed itself too noble to consort with. I supposed that the cathedral's location indicated the importance of the Church of Naga to the halidom.

It seemed that every person in Ylisse had turned up to see the newly-crowned exalt and his soon-to-be queen joined in matrimony. The great church was packed with people, and crowds thronged outside, hoping to catch a glimpse of the royal couple. It took a while before I was able to even get indoors. When I did, I was immediately accosted by several angry bridesmaids.

"Yes, I know I'm late," I grumbled as they shoved me into a side room. "The streets were crowded and I- ouch!"

"Stop struggling!" Lissa told me as she pushed me through the door, closing it behind her. "Where have you been?! Sumia has been worried sick! How do you think Chrom would feel if you didn't show up to his wedding?"

She was wearing a light pink dress, the colour that Sumia had chosen for her bridesmaids to wear. Lissa had, for the first time since I had met her, let her hair down for the occasion. The effect made her look rather mature, and even quite beautiful. The resemblance to her late sister would never have more pronounced, if it weren't for the scowl that darkened Lissa's expression.

"I told you," I tried to explain, "there were too many people out in the..."

"I don't want to hear it," the princess told me. "You have less than a quarter of an hour before the ceremony starts." Lissa turned to one of her fellow bridesmaids. "Maribelle, please tell Sumia that Robin has arrived. There's no need for her to fret."

"Of course, darling." Maribelle gave me a scathing look before departing through the doorway.

I felt a tugging sensation from behind me, followed by a cold feeling down my back as my cloak was pulled off of me. Lissa pulled out a dark-coloured suit with a white cravat from somewhere.

I paled. "I was actually just going to wear my cloak."

"Not a chance," a voice snarled from behind me. I looked over my shoulder to see Sully holding the cloak. She was wearing the same pink-coloured dress as the other bridesmaids. I had never seen the cavalier in anything other than her armour, and the image before me was extremely jarring. But the small dress did accentuate her figure quite a bit...

Sully went on. "If I have to suffer through this without my dignity, I'm dragging you down with me." She grabbed hold of me, fumbling with my shirt as she unbuttoned the front of it.

I felt my face burning scarlet. "I- I can dress myself!" I cried.

"I'm sorry, Robin," Lissa said in a sickeningly sweet voice, "but you have less than five minutes

to get changed into this suit, and you've proven that you're incompetent at time-management already this morning."

"A-at least get one of the ushers to do it!" I yelped as Sully pulled my shirt off, leaving my bare chest exposed.

"You *are* one of the ushers!" Lissa reminded me crossly. "Now stop squirming and let Sully do her job!"

The female cavalier winked. "I hope you remembered to wear your smallclothes."

I squeaked.

Five minutes later, I was standing at the altar, pulling on my new cravat, which was beginning to constrict my windpipe.

"I hate this thing," I muttered to my fellow ushers. "Is this how Virion feels all the time?"

Stahl nudged me with his elbow. "Stop fiddling with it. The ceremony's about to start."

"I wouldn't even be having this problem if Sully hadn't insisted on dressing me," I complained.

"That makes two of us," Stahl commented, tugging absent-mindedly at his own cravat.

Frederick, the third and final usher, hushed our quiet discussion with a glare and a clearing of his throat. Just then, a woman who I assumed was the cleric appeared from a side room. She was garbed in white robes, and she had long, blonde hair and a gentle face. But something seemed off...

I frowned. "I was under the impression that person marrying Chrom and Sumia would be a man." Chrom himself had told me that a monk by the name of Libra would be presiding over the ceremony.

Stahl scratched the back of his neck. "Actually, Robin, he *is* a man."

I blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"His name is Libra. He's a monk, or so he says."

I gaped in a rather impolite manner at the 'monk' that now stood patiently behind the altar. His eyes were closed and his lips were moving in silent prayer. Such soft, feminine lips...

I shook myself. "You're absolutely sure that he's a man?"

Stahl nodded. "He told me as much himself."

So confused was I by this fellow's appearance that I barely noticed Chrom's arrival, signalling the start of the ceremony. The exalt stepped up to the altar and stood beside Frederick, his best man. He was dressed in an elaborate white suit, befitting his status as ruler of the halidom. He gave me a nervous nod, which I returned in as calming a manner as I could.

Just then, the doors of the cathedral were flung open and in walked the bride. Sumia was dressed in a splendid, white dress, with her once-mousy hair shimmering in the morning sunlight. I heard

Chrom take a sharp breath. I didn't blame him.

As she walked down the aisle, I realised how much Sumia had changed from the timid pegasus knight I had first met in the barracks all those months ago. When she approached the altar, she smiled warmly and confidently at Chrom, who returned the smile and took her hand as they turned their backs on the congregation.

The monk named Libra spread his arms and spoke in a worryingly-feminine voice.

“Dearest children of Naga, we are gathered here on this day to witness the union of these two faithful before the Divine Dragon...”

I had never had much time for religion in my life. Perhaps it had been the way my mother had raised me. I was unfamiliar with the customs and prayers associated with the Church of Naga, and so I had to be given a crash course in sermons if I was to be involved in the wedding. Fortunately, Lissa was a cleric herself, and learning the catechism of the Church and other religious ceremonies was an integral part of her training. She had been a good, if somewhat impatient, teacher.

But even with all of Lissa's lessons and advice, I found myself mumbling through several prayers and briefly forgetting to kneel during the blessings. Libra's voice had a musical quality to it, and I had to stop myself from drifting off once or twice. Before I knew it, the ceremony was finished, and Libra stepped back as Chrom wrapped his wife in a tender embrace and they kissed for the first time as exalt and queen.

The cathedral was filled with applause, the loudest of which was coming from the Shepherds. I clapped along, happy for my closest friend. It didn't seem all that long ago that Chrom could hardly look Sumia in the eye, and yet here they were, standing before the halidom as man and wife.

As soon as we arrived at the palace, the celebrations began. Over the previous few weeks, the grand building had been decorated and adorned with banners and emblems to mark the occasion. If the celebration in Plegia a few months before had been a party, then the feast held in the Ylislean palace that evening was a lavish banquet, filled with food and drink from every corner of the continent, and further still.

“What is this, exactly?” I asked, swirling the contents of my chalice.

“It's rice wine, from Chon'sin,” Lon'qu muttered from his seat beside me.

“Chon'sin?” I repeated the foreign-sounding name. “I've never even *heard* of the place.”

“Anna told me that this wine came from overseas,” Lissa piped up from next to Lon'qu. “She said it was brewed in Valm.”

Lon'qu's mouth hardened in a line, and he said no more on the subject.

We, as 'esteemed guests' of the royal family, were seated at the grand table at the top of the palace's banquet hall. From early afternoon, the hall was filled with noise and merriment, which carried on through the evening and late into the night. Speeches were made and jokes were told. Frederick's best man speech went on for close to a half-hour. Most of said speech consisted of him singing Chrom's praises, proclaiming him as the greatest exalt the halidom would ever see and that his reign would last for close to a century. In fact, the speech only ended because the knight was so overcome with emotion that he had to sit down. Phila was sitting next to him, and she laid a comforting hand on his shoulder as he slumped into his seat with as much dignity as he could muster, while the banquet hall was filled with applause.

One of the more surprising announcements of the evening came from the exalt's younger sister. Lissa stood up after one particularly hearty meal and spoke to the gathered nobles and commoners alike.

"I hope that all of you are enjoying yourselves," she began cheerfully. "It's not every day that one gets to celebrate a royal wedding. And so, because of that, I have a special announcement for you all."

She stretched out her hand and, to my eternal surprise, Lon'qu took it and stood. Although he was a lot taller than her, Lissa never looked more regal and proud than she did at that moment.

"In a month's time, I will take this man, Lon'qu of Regna Ferox, as my husband. He shall thenceforth be known as a prince consort of Ylisse."

The room was filled once again with applause. There were surprised murmurs from around the hall, but none of them were hushed or disdainful. Everyone seemed to be happy for the new royal couple, particularly my fellow Shepherds. I was expecting Chrom, of all people, to look stunned by Lissa's announcement, but he instead smiled graciously at his sister. Had he already known? Perhaps Lon'qu had asked him for his blessing?

The celebrations continued on. By now, the wine was beginning to sink into many of the people in the hall. One had to practically shout to be heard over the din of drunken voices. The noise and the alcohol were beginning to go to my head, and so I excused myself from the hall, hoping to take in a breath of fresh air somewhere in the palace grounds. I had scarcely taken a few steps outside of the busy hall when Tharja stepped out from behind a nearby pillar.

"I've been waiting for you," she said, with that little smile of hers.

I couldn't help but smile back. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"You know how I hate crowds," she said, moving slowly closer to me. "I thought it would be much better if you and I just...slipped away."

I grinned as I stepped towards her. "I think I can arrange that." I brought my arms around her back and kissed her tenderly. She pressed her warm body up against mine as the kiss grew more passionate. When we eventually broke apart, she and I were left breathless and hungry for more.

Wait a moment, a thought came to me. *Why am I doing this? How can I be leading her on again?*

But a voice in the back of my mind spoke louder. *"Embrace your desire. This is what you want."*

Indeed, seeing Tharja like this, standing before me with that sultry expression on her face, washed whatever doubts I may have had away.

I grinned again as I grabbed her and picked her up, carrying her in my arms down the corridor. She had been taken completely by surprise, and I was compelled to kiss her again. After searching frantically for a minute or two, we found an empty room that contained a beautiful, four-poster bed with elegant, white sheets. I carried Tharja over to the bed, slamming the door behind me as I went. I laid the Dark Mage down on the sheets before unbuttoning my shirt and tossing it aside.

"That's right..."

I crawled onto the bed, to where Tharja lay waiting, having slipped off her own cloak. I brought my mouth down atop hers and we kissed once more, much less conservatively than we had before. I could hear her panting as she brought her arms up around my bare back, could feel her warm breath against my face.

“This is what you truly desire...”

With a sudden burst of strength, she pushed against me and we rolled over until she was lying on top of me. Our kisses became more frantic, our hands running across each other's bodies. My own fingers slid down her back, downwards, further than they had ever been before. Tharja gasped delightedly and I felt her lips move hungrily down to my neck, then past it down to my collarbone and to my naked chest. Each place that she kissed burned like fire.

“You want this...”

Her beautiful face appeared in front of me again, after what seemed a blissful age. Her hands grasped hold of mine, and she guided me up to her back. I felt my fingers slip in underneath her clothing and undo the fasteners. She sat up as her top came off, leaving her chest as bare as mine. But when she leaned back down again, I gazed into the depths of her eyes and saw only a disgusting face, twisted with lechery and wickedness. It was my own face.

“We want this,” the voice whispered.

I sat up. “No.”

Tharja blinked. “What?”

I shook my head. “This...this isn't right.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked rather upset. I didn't blame her.

“It's not right for me to toy with your emotions like this.”

“But...I love you,” she whispered.

“But I don't love *you*,” I told her, frankly. I swung my legs to the side and sat on the edge of the bed. “I can't deny that I'm attracted to you, but it's not the same as the way you feel about me. You obviously care a lot for me, but I don't feel the same for you.”

“Then...why did you kiss me?”

I chuckled darkly. “Because you are a beautiful woman and I am a weak, lecherous man. If we were to carry on with this relationship, I would just end up using you for my own selfish wants. I can't devote myself to you the way you devote yourself to me. That's why I'm stopping this now, before it goes any further.”

She swallowed, before turning her face away from mine. When she spoke, her voice was filled with bitterness. “I tried so hard to make you love me. But it didn't work. The one time I try to do something on my own, without using any curses or hexes, it backfires on me.”

I looked over at the Dark Mage, who was putting her clothes back on. “Tharja...don't feel bad for yourself. You did nothing wrong. You were just following your heart. That's something to be admired. The one in the wrong here is me. I was leading you on, making you think that I was interested.” I laughed mirthlessly. “I suppose it's in my nature to use people. I'm a tactician, after all.”

She turned to face me. “Don't say things like that,” she ordered me. “You're a good person, Robin. Better than anyone I've ever met. Other people bore me, with their dull lives and

meaningless conversation. But you...you're so different."

"Tell me about it."

"There are others out there," I promised her. "People who are worth your time, and your love. People who'll devote themselves to you the way you do to them."

She scowled. "I could never 'devote' myself to anyone other than you, Robin."

"You say that now, but you have your whole life ahead of you. There may be someone who really wants to get to know you. You won't have to try all...*this*."

"Seduction doesn't come naturally to me," she admitted. "I just wanted you to pay attention to me, to notice my love."

"I know Tharja, I know." I tried steering the subject in a different direction. "Do you remember Kellam?"

She frowned. "Who?"

"He helped us sneak into the Plegian capital. He was with us when we first met. He always wears this big suit of armour."

Her face fell. "Oh. *Him*."

"Well, he seems a bit infatuated with you. I think you should go talk to him."

"Oh, really?" She folded her arms over her now-covered chest. "And what would be in it for me?"

"I would consider it a personal favour," I told her.

"...Fine. I'll go talk to your armoured friend." She got up to leave.

"Uh, he won't be wearing armour right now," I said, quickly. "It might be a bit tricky to find him in the crowd."

She waved her hand dismissively. "I have a spell for locating people whose names I know. How do you think I could follow you so easily?"

"...Right."

"I'll find him. Don't expect me to like him, though."

And then she was gone. I breathed a deep sigh, lying back down on the bed.

"Maybe I was too hard on her?" I muttered.

"You are a fool."

"Oh, I know. Believe me, I do."

I must have stayed like that for a while, lying there on the soft, feather bed. It wasn't until I caught a glimpse of the moonlight streaming in through the window that grabbed my shirt and got dressed again.

I took to wandering the palace. At that time, it was rare that the great building was ever so quiet. All of the guests were still dining in the banquet hall, leaving the rest of the palace silent as a ghost. Which was why I was so surprised when I discovered Sumia, standing alone on a balcony on one of the palace's upper floors, just outside the royal bedchambers that I knew belonged to Chrom.

"Sumia? Is that you?"

She turned to face me, dressed in a delicate silk robe. "Robin? What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing, milady. The celebrations are in your honour. I would've thought you would've liked to be present at your own wedding feast."

"I told Chrom that I was tired, and he escorted me from the hall."

"Is that allowed?"

She smiled. "Of course. I *am* the queen, after all. I can choose to leave the feast whenever I wish."

I appraised the young woman quietly, admiring her newly-found confidence and grace. "You've changed. It was less than a year ago when I first met you, and you've grown so much since then."

She giggled. "You've changed a lot, too. When you walked into the barracks that day, you were so quiet. You barely had any more presence than Kellam." I winced, prompting her to laugh again. "And now, look at you; the Royal Tactician and a hero of Ylisse."

I swelled a little with pride.

"We've both changed," Sumia went on, "and it's all because of Chrom."

"Speaking of Chrom," I said, "where is he?"

She nodded towards the door to the bedchambers. I took a step towards the door, before Sumia quickly said, "You probably don't want to go in there."

I stopped. "You're right," I agreed. "I probably don't."

I turned back to face her, trying to hide the sudden tinge of red on my face. "How does it feel to be queen of Ylisse?" I asked her, trying to change the subject as quickly as I could.

A wistful look appeared on Sumia's face. "It feels like some kind of dream. I never thought that someone like Chrom would ever notice me. And now we're married!"

"I doubt there was any chance of him *not* noticing you. Ever since I first met Chrom, you're the only woman he could ever think about. Besides Emmeryn and Lissa, of course."

Sumia gazed out at the stars. "I guess we were just meant to be."

"It was your fate," I told her, and she nodded happily.

"But what about *you*, Robin?" She grinned suddenly as she looked over at me. "Is there any woman in *your* life that you could only ever think about?"

I smiled sheepishly. "I doubt my love life could ever be as interesting as yours." I let my smile

fade as I asked Sumia, “How is Cordelia?”

Her smile dropped. “She’s...upset. But I would expect her to be. After all, it could’ve been me in her shoes. In another life, she could’ve been standing there at the altar today.” Her shoulders slumped. “I suppose that just makes it harder on her.”

“So you knew she had feelings for Chrom?”

She nodded. “We both fell in love with him at the same time. It was only natural: we’re best friends, after all. Cordelia, she’s so much better than me in everything I try to do. She plays the harp, while I couldn’t pluck out a tune if my life depended on it. She always wins whenever we spar. And she’s a master cook, while all I can ever do is bake pies.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Pies?”

“I *know*. That’s why it surprised me so much when Chrom chose me over her.”

It wasn’t much of a surprise to the rest of us. I said aloud, “You shouldn’t put yourself down so much. You’re a perfectly capable pegasus knight. And I know you’ll make a truly great queen. And Chrom needs you by his side more than anyone else. Don’t forget that, alright?”

She nodded again, keeping her head down.

“Uh...Sumia? Are you alright?”

She stepped forward and wrapped me in a hug. “Thank you, Robin. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

“...You’re welcome. But could you please stop hugging me? I don’t want someone to walk by and get the wrong impression.”

She stepped back. “Of course. My mistake.”

“It’s fine.”

Just then, the door to the bedchambers opened and Chrom stepped out. He rubbed his eyes blearily. “Robin?”

Sumia gasped and I said, “Good evening, Chrom.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was just taking a stroll when I bumped into Sumia, so we started talking.”

“Oh. Alright.”

He stepped out of the doorway, prompting me and Sumia to cry, “Wait!”

“Wh-what? What is it?” He frowned, looking up and down the corridor. “Is there something wrong?”

Sumia burned bright red as I said, “Chrom. Your clothes.”

He peered down at himself, before sighing and saying. “Right. Sorry.”

Sumia ran forward and practically shoved her husband back into the room.

“Sumia, I- ouch!”

The door slammed behind the royal couple. I stood awkwardly outside the door, trying to ignore the fumbling sounds coming from within. Finally, a few minutes later, Chrom emerged, now wearing a simple tunic and breeches. Chrom had never looked less royal than at that moment.

“Everything alright, Robin?”

I thought about mentioning Tharja and her feelings towards me. I thought about mentioning Cordelia’s recent heartbreak. I even thought about mentioning the mysterious voice that had been plaguing my thoughts as of late.

But instead, I said, “Everything’s fine. You?”

He smiled. “Truthfully, this is the happiest I’ve been since Emm’s death. I know we still have a long way to go until the halidom has recovered from this tragic war. But I know we’ll pull through, as long as you’re by my side, Robin.”

I grinned. “And Sumia, too?”

“And, Sumia, of course.”

“Frederick?”

“Well, yes. Frederick, as well.”

“And Lon’qu?”

Chrom laughed. “Yes, I’m sure Lon’qu will make a *massive* contribution to the ruling of the halidom.”

“So, you’re not worried about marrying your only living relative off to an uncultured, foreign barbarian?”

“I’d love to see his face if he heard you calling him that.” He shook his head. “And I’m not ‘marrying her off’. She *chose* to be with him. Came as a bit of a shock, mind you, when brave old Lon’qu came to me for permission to marry my sister.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him that he didn’t need my permission. It was their decision to marry each other, and they had my blessing for it. It’s not for me to dictate who my sister falls in love with.” He hesitated.

“Granted, I *do* think that they rushed into marriage a little bit.”

I snorted. “Chrom, only a few months ago, you could barely look Sumia in the eye. And now the two of you are doing things that would make your poor, faint-hearted tactician swoon!”

We shared a laugh, before Chrom said, “I hope you’re not jealous?”

“Not at all,” I said dismissively.

“*That’s a lie.*”

I swallowed, then carried on, “I’m happy for the two of you, honest.”

“*More lies.*”

“Is something the matter, Robin?” Chrom asked.

“Well,” I said hesitantly, “I...I’ve been...”

“Yes?”

I sighed. “Tharja.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s Tharja. She’s...she says she’s in love with me.”

Chrom gaped. “*Tharja*? You mean that bizarre Plegian girl? The Dark Mage who followed you back from the castle when you kidnapped the Mad King?”

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed.

“You move *fast*, Robin,” Chrom said, with a broad grin plastered onto his face. “You’ve got the girl saying she loves you, and all!”

“Shut up!” I growled, making the exalt laugh again. “It’s not like that! I don’t know what happened. She said that she fell in love with me when we first met. That’s why she joined the Shepherds.”

“You’re more of a charmer than I gave you credit for,” he remarked. “Maybe we should make use of your talents in recruiting new Shepherds?”

“I swear to all the gods, Chrom, you’re not making this any easier!” I snapped.

“Alright, fine,” he relented. “So what’s got you so worked up tonight, of all nights?”

“I...told her we shouldn’t be together.”

His face fell slightly. “Oh, I see. You’re worried she might take it badly?”

“Well, she *did* say that she could never want anyone else.”

“Oh, that *is* a problem. But there’s nothing you could have done about that. Unless you feel the same way about her?”

“No,” I said quickly. “I mean, she’s beautiful. *Really* beautiful. Possibly the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever...”

“Robin!” Chrom interrupted my revelry. “You’re drooling.”

I wiped my mouth clean. “The point being that she is an emotionally-fragile young woman and I’ve let her down.”

Chrom scratched his chin in thought. “You know, from what I’ve seen of her, Tharja never really struck me as being ‘emotionally-fragile’.”

“...It just makes me wonder. Did I miss out on a valuable relationship because of my actions? A life with Tharja could have been the closest thing to true happiness I’ll ever get.”

Chrom rested a hand on my shoulder. “It’s alright, Robin. There will be others.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said. “It’s not like you’re an expert on romance.”

At that moment, the doors to the bedchamber opened again, revealing Sumia, still in her robe.

“Chrom, darling,” she said, “are you coming back to bed?”

Chrom caught my eye. “I’ll be with you in a moment,” he promised her.

The doors shut again, and he let a grin spread across his face.

“What were you saying?” he asked innocently.

I grumbled. “Just my luck.” I stepped away from him. “Alright,” I said, “I’ll leave you alone with your wife and your ego. I imagine there’s still plenty of wine left in the banquet hall for me to drown my loneliness in.”

Chrom chuckled. “It’ll be alright, Robin. The future’s looking bright, after all.”

I smiled back. “*Looks like our fate is in the hands of the gods.*”

I frowned as Chrom turned away, bidding me goodnight. Had I said that out loud? That wasn’t me speaking just now. I had heard the strange voice reverberating in my head, but my own lips had definitely moved.

The doors to the bedchamber closed for the final time as I turned away and stalked down the corridor. My heart was pounding. I began to feel fear creeping up inside me, clawing up from the pit of my stomach. The moonlight now seemed harsh and cold, a pathetic excuse for light in the midst of darkness.

“What’s happening to me?” I whispered.

The darkness offered no reply.

Chapter 18

The next few years were some of the best of my life. Chrom and I worked tirelessly to restore Ylisse's splendour in the wake of the violence. This was no easy task, for the war had taken a heavy toll on the halidom. But with Feroxi muscle and Plegian gold, peace was eventually brought back to the people.

In the meantime, I found myself surrounded by newlyweds. It seemed that the two royal weddings in the space of a year had prompted the rest of the Shepherds to get married, as well. Immediately after the wedding between Lissa and Lon'qu, Maribelle announced that she would be marrying Virion and joining their two noble households. I still had no idea which 'noble household' Virion claimed to be from, but the Shepherds were nonetheless overjoyed to see the two joined in matrimony. Considering how obsessed the pair of them were with their own upper-class ideologies, it was a match made in heaven, as far as I was concerned. The couple moved into Maribelle's manor in Themis, although they still visited Ylissol when they could.

The next two Shepherds to tie the knot were Sully and Stahl, to no one's surprise. The cavalier pair decided to buy a house in the city in which they would settle down in. I, personally, was just grateful that the two of them would stop using the barracks as their own little love-nest.

Finally, just over a year after Chrom and Sumia's wedding, Gaius proposed to Panne. Not that the marriage really mattered; after all, the two of them had already mated for life. In Panne's eyes, the whole ceremony was a load of noise and pomp, and Gaius was hardly used to having a roomful of eyes trained on him. Unless he was on trial, of course.

And then, one morning, just when I thought things were beginning to calm down after the series of weddings, Chrom came to visit me in the barracks.

"We were thinking," he began, "Sumia and I. Since you're now the Royal Tactician..."

"I still can't believe you roped me into that job," I muttered.

"...We would like for you to come live with us, in the palace."

I was stunned. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. You know we've always considered you to be part of the family."

"Chrom, I...I'm flattered, I really am. But why did you come to me now, of all times? Did something happen that made you consider me, all of a sudden?"

He grimaced. "Nothing ever gets past you, Robin. I'm afraid you'll have...other duties to attend to very soon."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

He smiled. "I want you to be a godfather, Robin."

My stomach dropped. "A godfather...I can't believe..." I blinked. "Wait a moment. You mean Sumia is...?"

He nodded. "We're expecting the child to be born before the end of spring."

I couldn't help myself. I threw my arms around my friend and cheered. "Oh, gods! Who would've

thought? Me, a godfather to royalty?"

Chrom laughed. I joined in and the other Shepherds looked at us as though we were mad.

Just as before, Chrom's announcement was followed by several more from the other, married Shepherds. Sully announced her own pregnancy a few months after the royal couple had. The next year, Panne announced that she, too, was with child. This came as a pleasant surprise to both her and Gaius, since they hadn't expected humans and taguel to be capable of interbreeding. Both Lissa and Maribelle, who were now maturing into beautiful young women, also made their pregnancies known over the next few years.

And then, one morning, at the end of April, the halidom celebrated the birth of the exalt's firstborn child: a fair baby girl, with the Brand of the Exalt blazing proudly in her left eye. Chrom and Sumia named their first daughter 'Lucina', meaning 'light'; as the heir to the throne, she represented a shining new future for the halidom. As Chrom had told me, I was baby Lucina's godfather, a title I bore with pride. Of course, that mainly led to me cleaning and feeding the child when her parents were busy dealing with the affairs of state. Lissa, as Lucina's godmother, did her best to help me despite her own pregnancy. But I never once complained about my new duties, or at least not without humour. My duties as Royal Tactician, on the other hand, proved aggravating and tedious. I failed to see why it was my responsibility to ensure that all the rural towns and villages in the halidom were bringing in enough crops to feed the people. These duties and more all fell to me, to my displeasure.

The other children soon followed. Sully's daughter was named 'Kjelle', and her restless nature proved to be quite a handful for the young couple. Because of the lengthy gestation period of a taguel, Lissa and Maribelle both had their respective sons before Panne gave birth to triplets. The three half-taguel babes were named Cotto, Lina and Yarne, and each was adored equally by their parents. And then, of course, Chrom and Sumia went and had another daughter. They called her Cynthia, a name Sumia had been quite set on when she learned that she was with child again.

The eight children grew up in each others' presence, thanks to spending so much time in and around the palace. And, despite the stress of maintaining order in the halidom, I was happy. We were all happy, I suppose.

And so it went for the four years after the Second Ylisse-Plegian War. But the sense of peace and prosperity we all felt was not to last. It was replaced by foreboding, a feeling that not all was well outside the halidom. I began to hear rumours, whispers that a man by the name of 'Validar' had risen to power in Plegia after Gangrel's demise. The violent succession crisis that I had predicted would occur after the war had not erupted into chaos. Instead, this Validar person had succeeded in uniting his people under a common cause. What this cause was, I had no idea. But that wasn't all. Tales came from across the sea that not all was well abroad. I knew little of any nation outside of the Ylissean continent, and my lack of information disturbed me.

But most dreadful of all were the dreams.

They came to me on dark nights when the wind blew in from the west. I dreamed of shadowy, formless things that I could not describe, even if I wanted to. Words drifted to me from beyond the veil of sleep, their meaning lost in the shadows.

"As long...greed exists...men's hearts..."

"...tear the ground...hell..."

"The time...draws near..."

But, above all, no matter what terrible things the dreams would show me, they would always end with a horrendous sense of being trapped. I felt as though I was imprisoned in pure, agonising darkness, screaming for release, and my voice was the voice of hundreds, thousands...

And then I would wake, drenched in cold sweat, and would sleep no more.

The dreams frightened me more than I could say. No medicine or herb could relieve me of the nightmares. I asked Henry and even Tharja if they could lift the curse, but they could find no magical ailment that they could cure. I suffered in silence for years, spending my days dreading the evenings to come, when my eyes would eventually squeeze shut and my mind would become plagued with those horrors anew.

I tried not to let it all affect my duties as Royal Tactician. But by the time the messenger came to Ylisstol that bright summer's day, four years after the end of the war, I had been changed by my experiences.

"Wake up, Uncle Robin!"

The high-pitched voice snapped me out of my half-asleep state. I blinked to see the little princess standing before me, with an irritated look on her tiny face.

"You promised!" she squeaked.

I yawned. "Right, of course. Uh...what did I promise, again?"

Lucina rolled her eyes. I wondered where she had picked up that particular habit.

"You said you'd play with me in the gardens!" The young girl, who had only just turned three years of age, tossed her long, blue hair impatiently. The resemblance to her father was beyond striking. The girl had so much fire in her, different entirely from the timid girl her mother had been. The future of the halidom was indeed bright.

"I *did* say that," I admitted. "But where is your father, princess?"

"Fred-er-ick said he has a meeting right now." The young girl liked to talk, but she still had trouble with names every once in a while.

"Oh, really?" I hadn't heard anything about a meeting. "Well, then here's an idea. Let's go find your daddy!"

Lucina pouted, prompting me to add, "I'll give you a piggy-back ride on the way there."

Her eyes lit up, and I grabbed her, lifting her up onto my shoulders as she giggled madly.

"Onward to the audience chamber!" I exclaimed, hearing the little princess's delighted squeal ring in my ears.

I carried her all the way to the audience chamber like that. When we reached the big, brass doors, I put her down on her own two feet. I pushed the doors open, signalling for her to be quiet by placing a finger on my lips.

"So, what's all this about a meeting?" I declared loudly as I strode into the room, with Lucina toddling behind me.

Chrom turned, with Sumia, Frederick and Phila standing beside him. Lucina cried, "Father! Mother!" and she skipped over to join them. Despite the serious expressions on the royal couple's

faces, they smiled upon seeing their daughter.

“How’s my little princess?” Sumia cooed as she picked up the girl.

“What did I miss?” I asked, as I joined Chrom, ignoring the looks of disapproval I was receiving from Frederick and Phila. Standing before Chrom was a stoic-looking woman, wearing a large, heavy suit of armour.

Chrom gestured to the woman. “This is Raimi. She brings a message from Khan Regnant Flavia.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I muttered to the serious-looking woman.

“As a matter of fact, Sir Robin,” she said, “we’ve met before.”

“Really?”

“Four years ago,” Chrom said, “we did battle with Raimi’s troops at the Longfort.”

“Of course. I remember now. Sorry for interrupting your message.” It was rather unlike me to forget a battle, even one that happened so long ago.

“Please, Sir Robin, I took no offense. The khans have requested that Prince Chrom and you come to Regna Ferox as soon as possible.”

“What’s happened?” I asked.

“Our western neighbours of Valm are no longer acting so neighbourly,” Raimi explained. “Their emperor, who they name the Conqueror, has launched warships against us.”

“An invasion?” Chrom frowned deeply. “Are you certain of this?”

“Yes, milord,” the messenger nodded. “The khan hopes to hold a summit to discuss these recent events, if it please you.” She bowed as low as she could in her armour.

Frederick spoke. “What do you make of this, sire?”

Chrom folded his arms as he thought. “Ill business, to be sure. Raimi, tell Khan Flavia that we will meet with her at once.”

Just then Sumia walked over, still carrying Lucina in her arms. “Chrom,” she murmured, her face a mask of concern.

Chrom gently rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’d stay with you if I could, Sumia, but we owe Regna Ferox a great debt. I must apprise myself of the facts there before deciding on a course of action,” he said firmly.

But his wife and queen shook her head. “I’m not asking you to stay here with me. I’m saying I’m coming with you.”

Chrom’s eyes widened as he looked from Sumia down to their blue-haired daughter. “B-but Lucina is scarcely more than a babe! And Cynthia is still newly-born. They both need their mother now.”

The heir to Ylisse stuck her pink tongue out. “I’m not a babe!” she cried indignantly.

“That’s right, my pet,” Sumia whispered into the girl’s ear. “You’re a *big* girl now. You’ll be fine on your own here with baby Cynthia and Owain, won’t you?”

The princess nodded, happy to be praised by her mother. Chrom, on the other hand, didn't look pleased.

"I'm worried about more than just our children," he said tenderly. "I'm worried about *you*."

Sumia smiled. "That's sweet. But I'm still coming."

Chrom sighed, prompting Lucina to burst into giggles at seeing her father look so grumpy.

"I know better than to argue once your mind is made up," he said to his wife as he placed a hand on Lucina's head. "Right, Lucina?"

The princess smiled and nodded.

I chuckled. "I wish *I* could win arguments with Chrom this easily."

He glowered at me. "Robin, you're not helping." Turning back to his family, he said, "Just promise me you'll return at the first sign of danger, Sumia. Lissa and I had Emm of course, but we lost our parents when we were young. I want Lucina to grow up with her whole family around her."

"I'll be careful," she replied, planting a gentle kiss on his cheek. "I promise."

At this, Frederick, who had been speaking with Raimi while the discussion was going on, turned and stood to attention. "I will ride ahead and assemble an escort, milord."

"Thank you, Frederick."

With that, the knight left the chamber, along with the Feroxi woman. Phila remained behind.

"I'm quite impressed, Chrom," I said, after they had left. "You make a fine ruler. You've come a long way since we first met."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Have I truly changed so much?"

I placed a hand on my chin as I thought. "Mmm...in a way, you haven't." We both chuckled, before I said, "But you've grown as a leader and, of course, as a father."

"I've tried to do my best," he said. "My sister left a weighty legacy. I do all I can just to live up to it."

Just then, the doors of the audience chamber burst open a second time. "What's all this about a messenger from Ferox?!" a female voice cried. "And why am I the last to hear about it?"

Chrom sighed again. "I was going to tell you later, Lissa."

The exalt's sister scowled. "Yeah, right! You were just going to up and leave me here, weren't you?"

"I was thinking of the children," he protested.

Lissa ignored him, turning to Sumia instead. "Can't you talk some sense into my brother?"

The queen smiled. "I already have, Lissa."

The elder princess faltered. "Oh." Suddenly, her anger flared up again. "You were going to leave

your *wife* here, too?!”

“C-calm down,” Chrom tried, to no avail.

“Did you think we’d just let you go off on an adventure all by yourself? Unless you were planning on taking Lon’qu with you, as well?”

“Well...”

Lissa made a disgusted noise. “Typical. What are we to you, chopped liver?”

Chrom snapped back. “I *thought* you would want to stay here with your son!”

“But you have no problem with leaving your own daughters behind!” she retorted.

At this point, Sumia muttered, “Come on, Lucina. Let’s go play out in the garden, where it’s nice and quiet.”

“Okay!” the princess chirped as the two of them left the audience chamber.

“I’m not arguing with you about this,” Chrom told Lissa. “I want you to stay here and look after your son and nieces.”

“Chrom,” said Lissa, in a weary tone, “you know I love Owain. And I love Lucina and Cynthia, too. But *you* matter to me just as much as they do! We’re all *family*, Chrom. What happens if you go off and never come back? How could I deal with that?”

Chrom shook his head. “That won’t happen,” he promised. “All we’re going to is a brief summit with the khans. If all goes well, we’ll be back by the end of the week.”

“I want to be there for you anyway,” Lissa said. “Who knows what could happen to someone like *you* in a week?”

In spite of everything, Chrom smiled. “What am I to do with these women...?” he muttered.

“Does that mean...?” Lissa gaped.

“Yes, yes, you can come along.”

“Yes!” Lissa exclaimed. “It’s been so long since I got out of this stinky, old palace!”

“We’re not taking a holiday, milady,” Phila reprimanded her.

“I know, I know,” she muttered, before frowned slightly. “Although, I do feel bad about leaving poor Owain all alone here, without his mummy or daddy to look after him.”

“He’ll have Lucina to keep him company,” Phila said comfortingly. “And besides, it is House Ylisse’s tradition to wet-nurse their children.”

Chrom looked uneasy. “The only reason that Lissa and I were wet-nursed is because our parents were busy warring with Plegia. If we’re lucky, that won’t be the case with our own children.”

“When do we leave?” Lissa asked.

“As soon as we round up the other Shepherds,” I said.

Chrom looked at me. “We’re only going to a summit, Robin. Why would we need to bring all of

the Shepherds?”

“Don’t be naïve, Chrom. The Feroxi will call in the favours we owe them from four years ago. We’ll agree to defend them from the invading Valmese and then, sooner or later, we’ll be wrapped up in another war.”

Chrom grumbled. “I thought that you playing with my daughter nearly every day would have mellowed you out somewhat. Instead, it seems to have made you even *more* cynical!”

“I’m a tactician,” I reminded him. “I’m *allowed* to be cynical.”

“Not in *this* army, you’re not!” Lissa gave me a playful shove.

“Do you really think it’ll come to war?” Chrom asked me.

“Do *you*?” I fired back.

He hesitated, before saying, “Let’s hope not.”

A few days later, we were back on the Northroad, travelling to Regna Ferox once again. Those few days were spent gathering the Shepherds dispersed around the halidom, such as Virion and Maribelle. Arrangements were made for the other children – including the three infant taguel – to stay at the palace, where the servants would look after them until their parents returned home. We did not know how long we would all be away from the halidom. It was best for the children to stay together.

As we marched northwards, towards the snowy fields of Ferox, I couldn’t deny that I was excited. Even with a possible war lurking on the horizon, I was glad to be back marching alongside my fellow Shepherds. I knew the others felt the same, seeing as how the trip north was spent in exceptionally good humour. Even though most of them now lived in the barracks in Ylissol, I rarely saw them due to my duties as Royal Tactician. The journey to Ferox was almost like a reunion for me. With my companions by my side, I could have nearly forgotten about my troubles. Nearly, but not entirely.

“So, a man, a wyvern and a priest all walk into a bar...” Henry began from beside me. He instantly became the centre of attention, as every Shepherd who could hear him listened intently. “Now, the priest wasn’t very rich, so he had to ask the man for a few gold coins...”

I marvelled at how accepted Henry had become among the Shepherds since the war ended. He was a relative newcomer, but he fit right in, even though he was Plegian. Perhaps it was due to his kind-hearted nature?

“...and the barman says, ‘Order up!’”

I observed the other Shepherds as they listened to Henry’s joke. It was amazing how much some of them had changed in the space of four years. Ricken, whose voice had once been squeaky and high-pitched, now spoke with a mellow tone that commanded attention, despite him still being some degree shorter than me. His small face had matured, becoming angular and sharp-looking. Donnel, too, had grown. The farm boy had once been scrawny and frail. But, now that he was a young man, he had broadened and become more muscular, and he towered over most of the other Shepherds. Although he still wore that old, tin pot on top of his head and spoke with that unique drawl, ‘Donny’ had become a strong, capable-looking man. Which made it all the more peculiar to

see him holding hands with, and walking alongside, Nowi, who had hardly aged a day since I had first seen her.

“‘Whaddaya *mean* you can’t pay the tab?!’ the barman roars...”

Cordelia had grown even more beautiful, if that were possible. Her lips were fuller, her hair a shinier hue of crimson. Vaike – who must have spent the previous few years training non-stop, by the looks of him – was trailing behind Cordelia and was completely unable to take his eyes off of her.

“...No matter how hard they tried, they couldn’t calm the wyvern down! So then...”

Sully had managed to stay fit and healthy, despite now being a part-time housewife. Stahl looked stronger than ever. Tharja had matured in much a similar way to Cordelia, I noticed, no matter how hard I tried not to. And even though he was wearing his usual, heavy armour, I could tell that Kellam had grown bigger and taller. And was it my imagination, or was he easier to notice, too?

“...And so the barman says, ‘Keep that up, and I’ll be *dragon* you outta here!’ Nya ha ha!”

For every Shepherd that roared with laughter, there were two that groaned and shook their heads. I couldn’t help but grin as Henry was consumed with mirth at his own joke. Even the Dark Mage had changed, growing taller and more slender as he reached adulthood.

Had I changed, too? There was no doubt. Of course, whether that change was for better or for worse, I was unsure. I was more responsible, true. But there was something different inside me, a wickedness that was clawing its way out. No matter how hard I forced it down, it always rose up again, whispering its malicious intent.

“You don’t belong here. Your place lies elsewhere.”

And where might that be? I asked.

“You shall find out soon enough...”

I shook myself, pushing the eerie voice away for the time being. The Longfort was in sight, jutting upwards from the crimson horizon. We pressed on.

Chapter 19

We arrived in the Feroxi capital early the next day. In any other city on the continent, we would have made quite a sight as we passed through the streets, drawing crowds wherever we walked. But this was the home of Arena Ferox, where champions came from all over the world to do battle. The commoners barely took any notice of us as we passed through to the castle.

When we reached the castle, the Shepherds were taken to their accommodation while myself, Chrom, Lissa, Frederick and Phila were escorted directly to the audience chamber. But the person who guided us to the audience chamber was no hardened Feroxi warrior, but rather a young girl with pink hair and a slender figure. The more I stared at her as she walked nervously ahead of us, the more I realised that I had seen her before.

“Excuse me, miss,” I called out to her, “but, have we met?”

She flinched, before glancing back at me. “You mean me?”

“Yes.”

She nodded shakily. “O-once before, during the war.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Um...Olivia.”

Recognition came flooding through me. “Ah, I remember now. You’re that dancer who worked in the medical tent. You’re the West-Khan’s daughter, correct?”

“Um, well...”

Lissa gaped. “I remember you, too! You helped us out during the war. But I never knew Basilio was your *father*!”

Olivia blushed. She seemed uncomfortable at the amount of attention she was receiving all of a sudden.

“He...he’s not *actually* my father, but he treats me as though I were his own child. I’m grateful to him.”

“How did you first meet?” Chrom asked.

“...I owe him my honour and my freedom,” Olivia said, quietly. “Once, when I was with a travelling theatre group, I caught the eye of a corrupt noble. He would have stolen me and forced me into marriage if not for Khan Basilio.”

Chrom grunted and said, “And here I thought Basilio more likely to carry you off himself!”

“Oh no, you have Basilio all wrong!” Olivia’s face turned a brighter shade of pink. “He’s not like that. Not really.”

Chrom frowned. “You know, Olivia, I don’t remember ever meeting you before.”

“Well, I tend to keep to myself...er, milord,” she added quickly.

“Yeah, I can tell.”

We reached the audience chamber, and Olivia passed through the doors. A moment later, she returned and said, “The khan will see you now.” She bowed, trying to cover her face as we walked past.

Chrom glanced back at the dancer as we left her behind. “What a curious girl,” he said.

I clicked my fingers in front of his face, drawing his attention. “You’re a married man, now, Chrom. You can’t go around eyeing-up naïve, young, Feroxi girls.”

Chrom spluttered. “Th-that’s not what I...”

Lissa caught my eye and we shared a brief laugh as we entered the audience chamber. Flavia was there to meet us, and she greeted us heartily.

Chrom said, “I apologize I could not come sooner, Flavia.”

“What matters is that you are here, Chrom,” the khan replied.

“Is it true Valmese warships have set sail?” Chrom asked. “What can you tell us?”

Flavia grimaced. “Not much more than that, I’m afraid. The details remain hazy. Just a moment.” She twisted around and bellowed at a closed door behind the pair of thrones, “Oaf! Where are you, you big, bald cretin?! Chrom and his friends are here!”

Basilio emerged from the door, grumbling. But when he caught sight of us, his face split into a broad grin. “Ah! Well met, boy. I knew you’d come. And look who else is here! Robin, my old chum, how have you been?”

I smiled graciously as he turned to the other Shepherds that had joined us. “And I hear that *you* tied the knot with my Lon’qu! I never thought I’d see the day when he’d let a woman get anywhere near him! And I see you’ve brought my *second* favourite stick-in-the-mud, too!”

Frederick scowled as Basilio roared with laughter. “Aw, I missed you folks. You know what it’s like, stuck in this place with my frigid comrade for most of the year? It’s enough to drive an old man to lunacy, I tell you!”

“Enough with the complaints, oaf!” Flavia snapped. “Our friends didn’t come all the way from Ylisse to hear you prattle on about your useless self!”

Basilio raised his arms in mock surrender. “Alright, alright. We have someone you people should hear from. I believe you’ve met? He claims to have insight into Valm’s intentions.”

I frowned. *Who could it be?*

The door Basilio had come through opened again, and Virion stepped out with a flourish and a bow. He stepped forward, speaking grandiosely as he approached.

“Good day, lords and ladies. How fare you all? Allow me the great pleasure, and indeed *honour*, of introducing myself...”

Chrom waved his hand dismissively. “We all know who you are, Virion.”

Virion faltered as he tried to regain his momentum. “Hmph! You know nothing!” he cried, his voice rising triumphantly. “Prepare for my great unmasking! Long have I posed as archest of

archers! Yet that was but a ruse! Yea, an artifice, to disguise myself as a mere, above-average man. In truth, I am-”

There was a polite cough from the doorway as a young woman walked through. Her kind and gentle face was framed by her light red hair. She wore a suit of armour of intricate design. She smiled as she entered the chamber.

“May I present Duke Virion,” she said, sweeping her hand towards the silver-haired man. “I am his humble servant, Cherche. Greetings, sire. You honour us with your presence.” She bowed elegantly as Virion gaped at her.

“Cherche!” he whinged. “You stole my moment!”

Chrom stepped forward, towards the servant girl. “A pleasure, Cherche. Perhaps you could speak on your master's behalf?”

She nodded. “That may speed things along, yes.”

“Then please. Time is of the essence.”

Cherche took a breath. “Very well, then. First, concerning our origins: we hail from Rosanne, a fertile territory on the continent of Valm. Milord is the head of House Virion, and the rightful ruler of Rosanne. A fact he *often* reminds us of. And loudly.”

Virion chuckled. “Is she not a true wit? She gets it all from me, you know.”

“So what brings a noble and his charge all the way across the long sea?” Chrom asked.

Virion’s face seemed to grow dark. “The Valmese. Theirs was an unremarkable nation once; tiny, almost pitifully so. Had our continent not shared its name, you might almost have forgotten it existed. And so Valm might have remained, if not for Walhart the Conqueror. One by one, he has taken the surrounding realms into his growing empire. I had no choice but to ru-” He cleared his throat. “That is, to *recruit* new allies to aid my people. That's why I've come.”

Chrom stared at the nobleman, with his eyebrows raised. “You fled for your life.”

Cherche smiled pleasantly once again. “More or less, yes. While milord hastily gathered his valuables and guided his people to safety, I alone remained to keep an eye on the Valmese crisis.” Her smile waned. “I was there as Rosanne was swallowed up by Emperor Walhart's overwhelming forces. In the end, I, too, fled here to Regna Ferox seeking asylum.”

“To my great relief, I might add! Eligible women are one of Rosanne's most precious natural resources! It would be a shame to waste any, even one who cuts off her lord and ma-”

Again, that polite cough. “As I was *saying*,” Cherche muttered, her voice as sharp as a dagger.

Virion backed away nervously. “Yes, yes, all right, it was only a jape! Please, by all means, you may con-”

“So, begging your pardons, but perhaps it is time to cut this long story short: Walhart has conquered our continent and now seeks to conquer yours.”

Basilio stepped in. “She claims the Valmese fleet will be at our shores in a matter of days. We'll know soon enough if her story proves true.”

Cherche bowed again. “I speak only what I know to be true, good people. As does my lord. At

least, with respect to this matter,” she added.

Virion chuckled weakly. “There's that wit of yours again! That wonderful...needling...*chafing* wit.”

“I believe you both,” Chrom said, his voice as firm as his expression. “Basilio, we must secure your ports as soon as possible.”

“You should know,” Virion cut in, “that Valm has the strongest cavalry in the world. You will want to station troops with experience fighting mounted troops.”

Chrom grinned. “Why, Virion, are you volunteering?”

The chamber was filled with laughter at Virion's expense. As the others began discussing preparations for the fight ahead, I wandered over to the shame-faced noble. “You said that the Valmese army's strength lies in their cavalry,” I said. “Can you tell me more about them? What tactics do they favour? Any information at all?”

“But of course!” he declared. “For my bosom companion, I shall spare no detail!”

“Just the important parts,” I warned him.

He swallowed. “Ah, yes. Indeed. But perhaps we should return to my quarters and discuss this matter over a game of chess?”

I found myself smiling. “I think I'd like that.”

I gritted my teeth, sweat beginning to drip down my face as I stared down the pieces left on the board. Several times I had reached out with my hand, before withdrawing it hesitantly as I rethought my next move.

“I see that cup of tea did little to calm your nerves,” Virion observed from the other side of the board.

I tried to distract him, in any way I could. “So, could you tell me more about this Walhart person?” I asked, as innocently as I could.

“Of course. How much do you know about the founder of the Valmese Empire?”

I wasn't sure what this had to do with Walhart, but I answered, “That was Alm the Mighty, wasn't it? He united the once-divided continent into a single, great kingdom over which he reigned for several decades, until his death.” I moved one of my pegasus knights forward, determined to press my advantage.

“Indeed.” Virion had spotted my move and he made to counter as he spoke, “Alm is regarded in Valm as a hero who struggled valiantly for peace between the two powerful nations of Rigel and Zofia. As such, he is often referred to as ‘the Conqueror’.”

I realised the connection. “Ah. So Walhart is seen as the bearer of Alm's legacy?”

“More than that: many believe him to be none other than the second coming of Alm, a belief which Walhart does not refute. Hence, the shared epithet. Although he may lack the youthful

vigour that Alm had during his own conquest, Walhart is no less powerful or driven. And while the First Conqueror had a kind and compassionate queen by his side, Walhart has no such moral anchor, as it were.”

I brought my troops together into a retreat, hoping to lure Virion’s army into my territory. “If Walhart is so revered, does that mean that people just laid down their swords and bent the knee when he came to their lands?”

“Some did,” Virion admitted. “Others fought in vain, as Rosanne did. The proud nation of Chon’sin was one of the last to fall. But not even their famous swordmasters could halt the Conqueror’s advance.” He sent his wyvern riders forward, taking the bait.

“And now he wants to take over *this* continent, as well.” I sighed, leaning back in my chair. “I imagine that most men would be content with just one.”

“True. But Walhart is not ‘most men’. It’s your move, by the way.”

I glanced back down at the board, only to realise that I had succeeded only in trapping my army between Virion’s and the edge of the board. “When did *that* happen?” I croaked.

Virion chuckled. “Your attention was diverted, and so I took the initiative.”

It was now close to the end, and my troops were surrounded on all sides by enemy cavaliers and wyvern riders. I growled, unable to see a way out of this hopeless situation.

“Perhaps you should surrender? There’s no shame in giving up when there’s no way out.”

“If I surrender,” I said, “then we lose our homes, our towns and villages and even our nations. I’ll be damned if I let this continent become just another part of the Valmese Empire.”

Virion shook his head, tutting. “You are forgetting something very important, Robin.” He pointed to the wooden figurines placed on the board. “*These* are not the Valmese. They are merely pieces on a board.”

I blinked, prompting him to laugh.

“I fear that you sometimes take things too seriously,” he said.

I scowled. “And *I* fear that you sometimes don’t take things seriously *enough!*” Having said that, I muttered, “Alright, I surrender. You win.”

Virion nodded, pleased with his victory, as he took my commander. I slumped, my head falling into my hands.

“Patience, Robin. You are too young to look so world-weary.”

“What am I going to do, Virion? I...I don’t think I’m capable of winning this fight.”

“Come, now. You shouldn’t let a simple game affect you so.”

But I shook my head. “It’s not just the game. I’ve been...out of sorts recently.”

“What do you mean?” He peered curiously at me.

“I...never mind.” I stood up from my chair, only for Virion to stand up opposite me.

“Don’t be like that. Surely you can tell *me*? Am I not worthy of your trust?”

“Well, considering you lied to us all by concealing your true identity as a duke of Rosanne...”

His face fell. “Don’t forget, Robin. You, too, once lied to us about your own origins. What have I done that is so different from what you have done?”

I scowled. He had a point. “That’s...neither here nor there. And besides, it’s not that I don’t trust *you* in particular. This is something that I haven’t told *anyone*. You shouldn’t take any offence.”

“And yet, how you have wounded my pride, my very *soul*, with your cruel words!” Virion pretended to swoon. “I fear I shall never be trusted again! Oh, woe is me!”

I rolled my eyes. “Your charms have no effect on me!” I declared exuberantly. “For I, Robin, Royal Tactician of Ylisse, cannot be swayed by such amateur tactics!”

“And yet, my dearest partner in greatness, your disposition appears to have improved immensely!”

I threw my head back and laughed uproariously. “Hah! Such is the depth of my keen intellect that I can display a façade of gaiety while silently wallowing in my own misery and despair! Oh, woe is *me*!”

I was unable to keep acting any longer and I burst out laughing, with Virion joining in.

“You see?” Virion said, wiping a small tear from his eye. “You can place your trust in me. I shall guard your most covert secret with all of my will and fortitude!”

I smiled, pleased by the man’s companionship. “Thank you, Virion.” My smile turned into a grin. “But you shall have to try harder in order to coerce such a coveted secret out from between my most reticent lips!”

“Then tremble in fear!” he exclaimed, placing one foot up on his wooden chair as he gestured. “For I, Virion, the archest of archers, shall stop at nothing until your innermost and private musings are mine to scrutinise!”

I smirked. “Then I swear by the gods that the information you seek shall never be yours!”

Virion opened his mouth to retort once again, but we were interrupted by a cry of exasperation.

“What are you two *doing*?!”

We turned to see Lissa and Maribelle standing in the doorway, staring open-mouthed at the antics of Virion and mine.

I grinned broadly. “Forsooth! The fair maiden has asked of us what it is that we are doing. And yet, is it not as clear as the skies of a Plegian morning that we are taking part in the most respectable of pastimes?”

Lissa raised an eyebrow at me. “‘*Maiden*’?”

I cleared my throat.

Virion turned his head and called, “Cherche, we have guests. Be a dear and fetch the tea, would you?”

“Of course, milord,” the servant’s voice responded from the next room.

Maribelle shook her head. “I swear, the two of you better not start prancing around the palace like

that. You're going to be a bad influence on the children."

Lissa giggled. "It's hard to imagine our boys acting like *that*."

Virion spread his arms wide as he stepped towards Maribelle. "My dearest Ylissean flower! How I have longed for your sweet embrace, your tender lips!"

Lissa sighed. "Does he *ever* stop talking like this?"

Maribelle smiled as she walked forward and held her husband close. "Only when he thinks no one is listening," she said, pecking him on the cheek.

"So, Maribelle," I said, "did you know that Virion was foreign royalty already?"

She nodded as she stepped away from her husband. "He told me before we were married. He said that he didn't want any secrets holding back our love." She sighed and kissed him again. "My handsome duke."

"Do you see now the benefits of trust, Robin?" Virion asked.

I frowned. "Don't tell me you're going to kiss *me*, too?"

Everyone laughed, even Maribelle, whom I had once thought to be entirely without a sense of humour. Just then, Cherche arrived with the tea.

"Impeccable timing, my dear," Virion told her as she began pouring out the dark liquid into a set of elegant, porcelain teacups.

"Indeed," Maribelle said. "It's been too long since I last experienced the aroma of Rosanne herbal tea."

"Ooh!" Lissa's eyes grew wide. "Sounds lovely! I'll have a cup, too, Miss Cherche."

"Have as much as you'd like, my dear." Cherche's eyes twinkled. "And please, just 'Cherche' is fine." She turned to me with the teapot. "More tea, Robin?"

I waved a hand graciously. "I'll pass, thank you very much."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop by several degrees. "I'm sorry?" Cherche's voice was dangerously sweet. "You *will* have some tea, won't you?"

"Th-that's alright," I said, licking my lips nervously. "I had some earlier, with Virion."

"Oh, go on. Have a cup."

"N-no, really. I'm fine." I backed away, but Cherche advanced on me, eyes blazing.

She chanted, "Go on, go on, go on, go on, go on..."

I cried out and fled from the room, trying to ignore the laughter of the others as I refused to look behind me.

Forget the chess game, I thought, this is my most embarrassing defeat!

I sprinted through the halls of the castle, not daring to slow down. For all I knew, Cherche was still on my heels. Who would've thought that someone connected to Virion could be so threatening? She hadn't even introduced me to her wyvern yet. From what Virion had told me, the beast was twice as fierce as her master. A thought that made me shudder and caused my feet to move all the faster.

Earlier, I had taken the time to memorise the layout of the guest rooms, and which Shepherds were staying where. I quickly tried to calculate the ideal location for me to hide away safely in, running through the list in my mind as I ran. There was a maximum capacity of three per room, but I had put all of the couples into a room each, without a third member. I had even put Donnel and Nowi into a room with each other, by themselves, just to be sure. The remainder of the Shepherds, including myself, were sorted by gender. I was sharing a room with Henry and Vaike, but that was back in the general direction of Virion's chamber. I didn't want to take the risk. The next best option was the room occupied by Ricken, Donnel and Kellam. The three men kept a quiet, tidy and organised room, perfect for me to lie low for a few hours. Or possibly days.

I found the room in question, and I barged through the door without knocking.

"I'm sorry, but I really need to use- oh, *gods!*" I shrieked, turning and running back out of the room and slamming the door behind me.

"R-Robin? Is that you?" Ricken's voice called hesitantly, his voice muffled through the door.

"Never mind!" I called, my voice a few octaves higher than normal. "I'll find another room!"

"A more conscientious person would have knocked before entering," I heard Miriel say.

"Don't mind me," I whimpered. "C-carry on!" I walked away from the door as fast as I could, trying furiously to blink the image out of my retinas. *I need to pay more attention to my comrades, I thought. Then that might not have come as such a surprise. I just hope that poor Kellam doesn't make the same mistake, if he hasn't already.*

As I staggered around the corner, I bumped straight into Nowi, who had been running merrily along the corridor, arms outstretched like a bird.

She looked up at me. "Hi, Robin!" she exclaimed.

"H-hello, Nowi. Playing chase with Donny again?"

She nodded happily. "He gave me a head start!"

I glanced over her head to see Donnel himself sprinting this way. "Then you might want to run," I told her.

She turned and yelped, pushing past me as she made her escape.

"Hey, Robin!" Donnel called as he passed.

"You two play nice!" I called back.

It was good to see all of the Shepherds back together again. Even if war was approaching, I felt joy at being in their presence.

"A foolish thought. You don't belong with them. You never did and you never will."

"That's a very defeatist attitude," I muttered, praying no one was nearby to hear me talking to

myself.

The voice chuckled coldly. *“Jest all you want. I know how you truly feel.”*

“Then you’ll know that your words are hollow.”

“Come now, don’t be foolish and hypocritical. I know better than anyone what you are on the inside. You could never be one of these Ylisseans. You’re a Plegian, and a Grimleal, through and through.”

I smirked. “I would’ve said the same thing about Henry, once. And now look where he stands. People can change.”

“I will admit that one perplexes me.”

I laughed quietly. “I think he perplexes us all.”

“But you have something he doesn’t.”

“And what’s that?”

“Me. I will always be there, guiding you down the path to your fate. That’s what you want, isn’t it? To fulfil your destiny?”

I faltered. “Th-this is my destiny. I was always meant to fight alongside Chromand the Shepherds. This is where I belong.”

Something that sounds an awful lot like tutting reverberated around my skull. *“You can lie to others. But you can never lie to me. I am you, after all.”*

I shook my head irritably. “Just shut up. The last thing I need to hear right now is your bizarre ramblings.”

“I’ll be back,” the voice promised. *“Don’t you worry.”*

And with that, my thoughts grew quiet once again. I shuddered involuntarily. I hadn’t noticed the pain in my head or the chill down my spine until it was gone. I needed something to calm my nerves, something to warm me up after the cold, harsh presence had left its mark.

I sighed, and began the long walk back to Virion’s room.

I just hope the tea is still warm...

Chapter 20

We stood atop a small, grassy hill that overlooked Port Ferox. The town was the largest port town on the continent. It was a centre of trade and commerce, and was one of the main reasons why Western Ferox was a more economically-developed region than the east. Warm ocean currents kept the harbour free from ice, even during the most bitter Feroxi winters, and brought an influx of pleasant weather during the spring and summer months. All of these factors, and more, meant that the port town would constantly be full of merchants, travellers and others going about their daily business.

But, on that day, the port was nearly silent. The once-bustling harbour was filled with a group of great, hulking warships that towered over the modestly sized buildings. If it weren't for the numerous crimson-armoured soldiers lumbering around, the town would have been completely deserted. In the centre of the harbour, swaying back and forth on the tide, was a ship so massive that we knew it immediately to be the Valmese flagship. Upon the ship's great masts hung massive, blood-red sails, each emblazoned with a white crest. It was a sobering sight, to see the Feroxi town conquered so effortlessly by these new invaders. Here and there were signs of a struggle: a shattered window or an upturned, smouldering cart. But none of the Valmese seemed injured or set-back.

Chrom looked over the scene, his face stony. "How could this have happened?" he whispered. "Where are the Feroxi troops that were garrisoned here?"

I pointed towards a burnt-out stone building, with smoke pouring out of its windows. "I think those were the barracks."

"No wonder Basilio looks so grim," Chrom muttered.

I glanced over at the West-Khan, who was surveying the conquered town with an expression of barely-suppressed rage.

"They'll pay for this," I heard him say, in a quiet and terrible voice. "Mark my words."

His eastern counterpart stood beside him, looking equally indignant.

Just then, we heard a voice ring out across the town.

"Citizens! Soldiers! Hear my words! The Conqueror himself, Emperor Walhart, claims dominion over these lands!"

I peered out from behind the boulder we had hidden behind, searching for the man who had spoken. I saw a tall man with a pointed beard, dressed in the Valmese colours, standing on the deck of the flagship. The commander of the vanguard, most likely.

"You will grant your new emperor your ships!" he bellowed. "You will grant him all your provender! You will grant him your loyalty and your every possession! And you will surrender this land's greatest treasure, the Fire Emblem!"

I caught Chrom's eye, and he nodded. My eyes were drawn to the beautifully-designed shield he had strapped to his arm. I had laid eyes on it once before, in Ylisstol. Chrom had insisted on bringing it with him; after all, it was originally designed to be a shield. But, I realised, we may have just brought the Fire Emblem straight into the enemy's clutches.

"Do this," the commander said, "and your lives will be spared. Resist, and your lives are forfeit!"

Now, kneel! And swear fealty to the mighty Valmese Empire!”

The commander turned to a plainclothes-wearing man that was standing next to him. The man must not have been a Valmese soldier, for the commander cut him down after a brief exchange of words. What could that have been about?

Chrom stood up. “These savages will never listen to reason,” he said. “Everyone, prepare to engage!”

“‘bout time!” Basilio rumbled, his axe already in hand.

The Shepherds and Feroxi soldiers immediately set about readying their weapons. Frederick hurried over, with his mare in tow.

“Milord,” he muttered, “are you certain? Another war...”

Chrom nodded gravely. “I’ve had time to ponder Ylisse’s place in the world, Frederick. If this Walhart tyrant is allowed to invade Ferox, the halidom will likely be next. We must stand against these oppressors, or there can be no peace!”

I stood up beside Chrom. “We’ll need a vantage point,” I said. “Those building are going to block our view of the troops’ layout. Someone needs to fly over the town and act as our eyes and ears.”

The exalt nodded. “Sumia could do it.”

“And Cordelia, too. Pass the orders along that our pegasus knights must get ready to do some reconnaissance.”

“Begging your pardon,” a kindly voice said from behind me, causing me to jump. I turned to see Cherche, dressed in her armour and standing next to a hulking, black monster of a wyvern.

“Might I join, sire?” she asked Chrom. “This may not be my country, but it is my cause.”

Chrom blinked. “O-of course. Robin?”

“Y-yeah, I don’t see why not. Find our two pegasus knights; Sumia and Cordelia are their names. You’re going to fly over the town and report down to us their positioning as the battle wears on. Take down any straggling soldiers that you see.”

Cherche smiled pleasantly. “Excellent. My dear Minerva here hungers for a bite of the action as well!” She kissed the wyvern’s forehead gently, prompting the beast to roar proudly.

I swallowed. “Right.” I turned to Chrom and said, “Are we ready?”

“Whenever you are, Robin.”

I smiled and nodded.

Chrom unsheathed Falchion, pointing it upwards as if to pierce the heavens. He roared a fierce cry that was echoed by the Shepherds and Feroxi as we charged down the hill and into the town. I had spent my time atop the hill devising the ideal strategy if we were to take Port Ferox. The Valmese troops that held the port were mostly made up of mounted units. On the other hand, the Feroxi soldiers we had brought with us were all infantry, and would be at a severe disadvantage against these invaders. Fortunately, we Shepherds had our own cavaliers.

“Sully! Stahl!” I called out their names as we ran, pointing off to a side road that led into the heart

of the town. “Head down that road and see if you can hold off the Valmese.”

“On it, Robin!” They sped off down the road.

“Will they be able to handle it alone?” Chrom asked.

I shook my head. “That’s why I’m sending Panne and Gaius, as well.” I shouted over at the pair, sending them off in the same direction as the cavaliers had ridden. “I’m going to send most of our units off around the town to fight any wandering Valmese,” I explained. “Since we’re advancing from the east, and the harbour lies to the west, our forces should push the Valmese back to their ships. There, we’ll deliver the final blow.”

“Sounds good to me,” Chrom said. “And I presume we’ll be heading that advance?”

“Naturally,” I said.

Once the Shepherds and the Feroxi had been distributed around the town, Chrom and I advanced forward, towards the harbour. Apart from a few Feroxi warriors I had elected to accompany us, we were alone.

Suddenly, a squad of Valmese soldiers crossed our paths.

“They dare defy the Conqueror?!” one of them roared. “Then we must kill them all!”

“Not a chance,” I heard Chrom mutter, before leaping up into the air and bringing Falchion down atop one of their heads.

The Feroxi moved into action cutting down the Valmese as I stood behind Chrom. One of the Valmese slipped past their weapons and charged me, only to receive a blast of fire to the chest that burned straight through his heavy, plate armour. The Valmese soldier screamed as he collapsed and didn’t get up.

Chrom whistled, having been impressed by my display of magic. “New spell?”

“Elfire,” I responded.

“You’ve been practising.”

“A little bit, I suppose. Not that I have much time for it with all my ‘royal duties’.”

“Oh, come on. Most of the time I see you, you’re just playing with Lucina.”

“She’s a princess,” I pointed out. “Taking care of your daughter *is* a royal duty.”

“You make it sound like a chore.”

“It’s not?”

Heavy footsteps on either side indicated the arrival of more Valmese. Fortunately, we had yet to encounter any cavaliers or other mounted foes: all of the Valmese troops we had fought so far were heavily-armoured infantry. Since myself, Chrom and the Feroxi warriors with us were all lightly-armoured, we could all practically run circles around the Valmese. I ducked and weaved, scoring a few hits on the soldier I was duelling with. But his lance was shorter than I had anticipated, and he managed to bring it up to my shoulder and pierce my flesh. I cried out, feeling the sudden pain.

“*Careless.*”

I stayed close, avoiding the range of the enemy's lance, leaving him struggling to defend himself against my magic.

"Stop playing around."

I summoned a bolt of lightning and pressed it against the Valmese soldier's armour. He cried out as the current passed through his body. Another blast sent him flying backwards.

"Good. Now make him suffer."

As the Valmese man lay groaning on the ground, I lunged with my sword at his now-exposed neck. The point of my blade pierced straight through his windpipe, and he gasped and choked, until he finally lay still.

I sheathed my sword, gingerly rubbing my collarbone where the soldier had injured me. My fingers came away wet with blood, which was not unnoticed by Chrom.

"Are you alright, Robin?" he asked.

I nodded. "It's just a scratch. We need to press on."

The Feroxi soldiers nodded in unison, then sprinted down the street. We followed.

Chrom grinned from next to me. "I've got to say that I've missed this. You and me, toughing it out, side by side..."

"...Just us two men, sweating profusely, muscles bulging, sticking our swords into whoever crosses our paths?"

He laughed. "You said it, not me. But don't you agree?"

"Yeah, all these near-death experiences are what I *live* for."

"So, I suppose you'd rather be at home in Ylisstol, tending to those 'royal duties' of yours?"

"He has a point."

I twitched. "Probably not. But it doesn't mean that I enjoy cutting people apart like this. Even if they are Valmese invaders."

"That's a lie."

Chrom's grin faded at hearing my words. "I feel the same. But being locked up in that palace for so long made me miss all the times we spent as Shepherds. As a team."

I reprimanded him. "Hey, no need for all that melancholia. Being introspective is *my* job, remember?"

He chuckled. "Thanks, Robin."

By then, we were approaching the docks. We sprinted out, weapons in hand, into an open area in front of the harbour that was filled with Valmese troops. The Feroxi soldiers who had gone on ahead were lying on the ground ahead of us, some of them in pieces. The pavement was blood-splattered and coated in gore. Chrom and I came to a halt.

"Chrom..." I whispered to him.

His breathing was erratic, his shoulders tensed. “Those Feroxi men...”

“I know, Chrom. You have to stay calm.”

“I never even knew their names...”

“Chrom, listen to me!” I snapped. The Valmese had become aware of our presence and were advancing toward us at a steady pace. “We need to move back. We’ll wait for the others to arrive, or join up with them. We have to stick to-”

A roar that came from a nearby street snapped us out of our discussion. Even the Valmese troops all turned as one to stare at the street entrance. I saw some of them step backwards, moving away from the disturbance before the roar came again and a glittering, green dragon emerged from the street, flying like an arrow towards the Valmese. Some of the soldiers tried to run, but they were quickly blasted with dragonfire and they collapsed to the pavement, screaming as the flames consumed them.

Chrom blinked. “Nowi?”

From the same street that the young manakete had flown out of, a young man wearing metal plate armour appeared with axe in hand. He moved faster than one would have expected, cutting down any unfortunate Valmese that hadn’t been immediately killed by the burst of dragonfire. The man waved at us, yelling out our names in his thick accent.

“And Donny, too.” I rested a hand on Chrom’s shoulder. “This is our chance. We can mourn the dead later, right?”

The exalt looked at me, before giving me a small nod. “You’re right.” He stood up straight and faced down the Valmese once more. “Let’s go.”

We charged, swords drawn, towards the crimson-garbed soldiers. As we sprinted forwards, we heard cries of battle from either side, as the remaining Shepherds emerged from the other streets.

“It’s Vaike time!”

“Nya ha ha! Special delivery!”

“For Ylisse! Oh, um...and Ferox, too!”

Suddenly, the area was filled with fighting Shepherds and Feroxi. The Valmese, although great in number, were repelled by the superior will and strength of our own troops.

“Head for the flagship in the centre of the harbour,” I told Chrom. “The others will watch our backs.”

He nodded, and I followed him as he cut his way through the Valmese troops blocking the path to the flagship. Atop the deck stood the commander we had spotted earlier, mounted on his horse. He glared defiantly at us as we approached, before make a signal to his fellow cavaliers on the ship. The mounted Valmese troops all moved as one, cantering over to the gangplanks and touching down onto the dock. The commander made eye-contact with Chrom, and he rode purposefully towards us.

“I’ll take the big guy,” Chrom muttered to me.

I nodded. “I’m with you.”

As the commander drew near, his men spread out behind him, forming a line of defence. I noticed that the town, which had only moments before been filled with the sounds of battle, had grown very quiet. The only sounds that could be heard were the roiling of the sea and the steady *clip-clop* of horses' hooves making their way towards us. The commander on his horse towered over the exalt, as they stood only ten feet apart. He spoke, in that loud and compelling voice:

"I see you bear the Mark of Naga on your flesh. You are Exalt Chrom of Ylisse, correct?"

Chrom tensed, but only slightly. "I am."

"You stand before the great Commander Dalton, emissary of the Valmese Empire and honourable soldier." The man called Dalton tilted his head as he stared curiously at Chrom. "Tell me something, Exalt: what is a foreign royal such as yourself doing defending these Feroxi worms?"

I glanced behind to see our troops - the Shepherds and several, wounded Feroxi soldiers - gathered behind us. They had formed a line opposing the Valmese.

"The halidom has an alliance with Regna Ferox. We agreed to support one another in times of mutual peril."

The commander scoffed. "'Peril', you say? If you worthless creatures had simply laid down your weapons and submitted yourselves to the Conqueror's will, there would have been no need for bloodshed. This crisis is *your* fault for not obeying Emperor Walhart's wishes."

Chrom's shoulders were rising and falling with a deliberate, controlled rhythm. I moved my hand down to my sword, preparing for the approaching battle.

When Chrom spoke, it was in a measured, but firm and imposing voice. "Know this, emissary of Valm. We Ylisseans and Feroxi will never surrender to the greed of a tyrant. Walhart will regret ever having sent his troops across the seas."

Dalton scowled. "So be it." He signalled with his hand, and the cavaliers moved forward. "Men, give these pathetic dogs the war they thirst for!"

Chrom made a similar signal, and the Shepherds sprung into action. They began to do battle with the cavaliers that accompanied Dalton. A brief glance at the fighting that ensued told me that these particular Valmese were much more dangerous than the troops that had been stationed around the port town. But I didn't doubt the strength of the Shepherds. They were perfectly capable of holding their own against these soldiers. I followed behind Chrom as he sprinted towards Dalton, who lay waiting with his spear in hand.

"You dare to challenge me?!" the commander bellowed as he parried Chrom's opening strike. "You are *nothing*! A speck of sand on the boot of the great empire!"

"Wrong!" Chrom shouted as he made to swing Falchion again. "If you're truly as great as you claim, then you should know better than to underestimate us!"

"What is there to underestimate?" Dalton spat. "All I see is a childish rogue who thinks his lineage gives him the right to rule his scrap of a nation! Emperor Walhart is not merely the ruler of Valm because of some 'ancestral right'." He sneered. "He holds power because he has fought for it with his own strength!"

I stepped forward to deflect a powerful strike aimed at Chrom's exposed head. "He *usurped* it, you mean."

Dalton's eyes focused on me. "And who are you, whelp, that you would address me as your

equal? You, too, would stand in the way of the Conqueror?"

A grin spread across my face. "Equal'? No, Dalton. That's where you're wrong." I whispered a brief incantation, feeling the familiar sensation of an electric charge building up in my arm.

"Chrom, me, all of us here today; we're not your equals. We're so much *better*!"

I roared as I released the blast of lightning. It hit the Valmese commander in the side and he shrieked as he fell from his horse. He struggled to get to his feet, but Chrom was faster. The exalt seemed to vanish, he moved so quickly. One moment, he stood beside me. The next, he was standing above the fallen commander, with Falchion embedded in his stomach.

Dalton choked and retched, blood spurting out from his mouth. "Th-this is just the beginning... you foolish brat. The emperor will...tear your pitiful continent...asunder..."

I sighed and walked over to join Chrom. Before the commander could finish speaking, I drew my blade and slit his throat. Dalton gurgled and thrashed before finally lying still.

I felt Chrom's gaze on me, and so I turned to him. "What is it?"

He blinked. "Er...nothing. I just wasn't expecting you to...well..."

"We're at war, now, Chrom."

He groaned. "Yes. You're right."

A quick glance around the harbour showed me that the other Valmese soldiers had also been dealt with. The Shepherds and what few Feroxi that remained went about their post-battle rituals.

I slumped, feeling my weariness get the better of me at last. "Chrom," I wheezed, "is that all of them?"

He nodded. "Yes, but victory's come with a price." He indicated the damaged buildings of the once-bustling port town, as well as the numerous bodies strewn about the streets. The Feroxi soldiers had lost heavily in the battle, a fact that Basilio lamented.

"The town is in shambles," the West-Khan said bitterly. "As is my army."

Frederick joined us. "This is most troubling news. Feroxi soldiers are the finest east of the long sea. If they are having trouble, we are ALL in trouble."

"That's not the half of it," Flavia said, wrapping a bandage around her wounded shoulder. "This was just the vanguard - a mere taste of the meal yet to come."

"And once it arrives," Basilio continued, "their host will wash over the whole continent in weeks. There's no way we could repel them and defend our people. It would be a slaughter."

"Ylisse is no better equipped to handle an attack from the sea." Chrom paused for a moment as he thought, before turning to me. "Robin, what do you suggest?"

"Hmm..." I scratched my chin as I considered our options. I recalled what Virion had told me, coupled with what I had learned from observing the Valmese in battle today. "Their greatest strength is their cavalry, which puts us at a disadvantage on land. But if we were to catch them at *sea*..."

Chrom frowned. "But how could we do that? Ylisse has no warships."

Flavia grumbled. "And, after today's thrashing, neither does Ferox."

"So we'd need aid from a kingdom that does..." Basilio caught my eye as he spoke, and I knew he was thinking the same as me.

"Plegia," I said.

Chrom immediately shot down the suggestion. "No. Absolutely not. Out of the question."

"But, Chrom, think for a moment. Plegia has far more gold than either the halidom or Regna Ferox. And their navy is the largest on the continent. Not to mention their...abundance of soldiers."

"You should listen to your tactician, Chrom," Flavia told him. "There's only one path forward."

I raised an eyebrow. "Unless you know of any other kingdoms with enough gold to fund an overseas campaign?"

Chrom gritted his teeth. "...Fine. Send a messenger and request a summit immediately." He sighed as he turned away from us, towards the southern reaches. "Let us pray this new king is more reasonable than their last."

I said nothing as Frederick inclined his head slightly, before departing. I, too, left the scene, leaving the khans to discuss the battle with Chrom. Now that the battle was over, the convoy had set themselves up in town. The medical tent had been transferred to a local supplies shop, which was filled with vulneraries and herbal cures. I headed straight there, in search of healing after having taken several injuries during the battle.

Inside the 'hospital', as it were, I found Lissa and Maribelle, as well as some part-time healers, tending to a series of bedded and bandaged patients. While they weren't clerics or troubadours, the part-time healers knew their way around the medical tent and how to deliver first-aid. Lissa and Maribelle were tending to Vaike, who had once again sustained heavy injury during battle.

"You know," Lissa said as she reprimanded him, "if you just wore a chestplate every now and then, you wouldn't be in here half as often."

"Hah! Ol' Teach is no pansy warrior! A real man like the Vaike doesn't need a chestplate!"

"*Chrom* wears one," Lissa pointed out. "You don't see him coming in here every other hour, now, do you?"

Vaike flinched. "That's an issue between me and Chrom. No one else."

"Not *this* again."

Maribelle tutted as she brandished her healing staff. "I swear, Vaike, if you don't start wearing a chestplate, I shall stop healing you altogether! How does that sound?"

Vaike gulped. "I...uh, the Vaike will think about it."

The noble girl made a *hmph* noise and strode over to another patient. I took this opportunity to make myself known.

"Uh, Lissa?"

"Hmm...? Oh, Robin, how can I help you?" she asked.

“One of those Valmese bastards nicked me with his lance. Could you maybe have a look?”

She frowned wearily. “I’m a little busy, but I’ll see. Lie down on one of the spare beds, and Maribelle will be over in a few moments.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

I found an empty bed, which was thankfully free of bloodstains, and I lay down over the sheets. Just as I was getting comfortable, a cheery voice came from beside me.

“Hey there, Robin!”

I glanced over at the bed to my right, to see a white-haired young man grinning at me. He had a bandage wrapped tightly around his head, but otherwise seemed healthy.

I smiled. “Hello, Henry. I see the promise of impending war isn’t getting *you* down.”

He waved a hand. “Not at all. Why would it? I hardly ever get to throw fireballs around when it’s peaceful.” His smile waned slightly. “And Ricken doesn’t practise with me as much as he used to. Spends most of his time with Miriel nowadays.”

I felt my face heat up. “Yeah, I kind of figured that out. If you wanted, you could always come up and practise with me in the palace?”

It was a meaningless gesture: when I was in the palace, I nearly always had a form to sign or a budget to draft. And when I wasn’t busy as a tactician, I was busy as a babysitter for the young princesses.

But Henry smiled and said, “No need. I practise with Tharja now. She’s been teaching me all kinds of nasty hexes and curses. I never knew how twisted her mind was!”

He giggled, missing my wince. I hadn’t spoken to Tharja in quite some time. Probably over a year, in fact. Things were uncomfortable around her: she was still insisting that she was in love with me and I was still insisting that she find someone else. It didn’t stop us from being friends, but it was rather awkward, nonetheless. Although, she *had* taken to spending more time around the other Shepherds. Perhaps that was Henry’s positive influence on her?

As I was musing, a young woman with long, pink hair wandered over. I recognised her as Olivia. She began tending to Henry, checking his bandages and applying vulneraries. While she worked, the Dark Mage stared wide-eyed at the Feroxi woman.

“Are you the one who wrapped these bandages?” he asked her, pointing to his injured head.

She flinched, realising that he was addressing her. “Uh, y-yes.”

“Huh. I would’ve thought I’d remember a girl as pretty as you.”

Olivia’s face burned red. “W-well...you were unconscious at the time, so...” She trailed off.

“Oh, right. Nya ha ha!” He laughed as though she had said something hilarious. “You know, it might be the massive head trauma talking, but you’re looking *really* beautiful!”

She cringed. “Hold still,” she said, “I’ll be back in a moment.”

She spun around and practically ran out of the room, into a nearby storeroom. Henry watched her go, his mouth hanging open slightly.

I stared at him in amusement. “Her name’s Olivia, you know. She’s a dancer.”

“Then maybe I should ask her to dance for me?”

I grimaced. “From what I know of Olivia, that is the *last* thing she’ll ever do in front for you. She’s painfully shy. And she’s the adoptive daughter of Khan Basilio, himself, so don’t go getting any ideas or he might pummel you to within an inch of your life.”

Henry’s head snapped over towards me, his expression filled with excitement. “Really?!”

I groaned as I slumped back in the bed. “I should have known better than to try to warn you.”

Just then, Maribelle appeared on the scene. She strode over to my bedside and said, “Take your shirt off, Robin.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to buy me a drink, first?”

Her mouth pressed into a line. “I don’t have time to deal with your sarcastic comments, Robin. There are over two dozen patients in this ward that require medical attention at this very moment, so I *urge* you to show me your injuries. *Now*.”

I gulped, but complied with her wishes. Maribelle scanned my bare torso for wounds and scratches, paying particular attention to the gash near my collarbone. I felt uncomfortably exposed, mainly because I had had to remove my cloak, as well. During the examination, Olivia returned to an enraptured Henry.

“Um, are those red stains on your clothes?” the dancer asked him, pointing to a dark patch on the side of his robes.

“Oh, will you look at that? It’s blood! Wonder where it came from?” And, before my eyes, he brought the hem of the robe up to his mouth and licked it. “Oh, hey! It’s MY blood! Nya ha! I must have been wounded there, too! Oh man, good times.”

“Gross!” Olivia cried, louder than I had ever heard her speak before. “And also *really* creepy. And why are you laughing about it?! That wound needs to be dressed immediately!”

She went about undoing the front of Henry’s robes. Once his bare chest had been exposed, she gasped. “Oh, gods, look at how deep this is! How could you not notice?”

Henry simply smiled and said, “Oh, I’ve got a high pain threshold. It’s a genetic thing. Nerve damage. I’ve had a lot worse than this!”

“You’ve had *worse*? Where? And how?!”

“Well, when I was a kid, my parents put me in this exclusive wizard school...”

As intrigued as I was by Henry’s story, Maribelle’s examination brought my attention back to my own wounds.

“Why did you not attempt to contact a healer during the battle?” she asked.

“I was practically leading the charge, Maribelle,” I told her, with a slightly exasperated tone. “I couldn’t stop just because I had been scratched by a spear.”

She frowned. “...Very well. I see your point. But, would you kindly take a vulnerary or two with you the next time you enter a battle?”

I looked at the healer quizzically. “Are you showing *concern* for me, Lady Themis?”

She smiled primly. “Of course. You are the tactician, after all. If you were to be grievously injured, we would have no one to organise the troops.”

I sighed. “Right. Of course.”

She stood. “I have done what I can, but I wish you to stay here overnight. Too much movement could cause the wound to reopen.”

I grumbled, prompting her to add, “That’s an order!” She turned on her heel and left to tend to another patient.

I sank back into the bed. “*Now* what am I going to do?” I muttered, mostly to myself.

“You could try playing ‘I Spy’,” Henry suggested. Olivia had since departed, having dressed his wounds. “Here, I’ll start...”

I shuddered.

Chapter 21

Our journey south began the next morning, after Chrom announced that we would all be meeting with the Plegian government in a place called Carrion Isle. The region was a miserable piece of land off the north-west coast of the Plegian mainland, covered with rocky soils and jagged boulders. Due to a quirk of climate, the island was almost perpetually covered in mist and rain. But despite all that, there was a rather large castle situated on the edge of the island: a fortress that overlooked the border with Regna Ferox. I wagered that one could nearly see the Longfort from atop the castle, on a clearer day. It seemed that, in spite of Carrion Isle's dismal appearance, it was an important strategic position for the Plegians.

No wonder they want to meet us here, I thought.

The brief ferry ride over to the island had taken much longer than anticipated due to the amount of Shepherds that Chrom had insisted on taking with us. While the Feroxi had remained in order to lick their wounds, only the seriously injured among the Ylisseans had remained in Port Ferox, along with several healers such as Olivia and Maribelle. Lissa had naturally tagged along, against Chrom's wishes.

Chrom glanced over at me as we marched through the fog towards the castle. "Nervous, Robin?"

"Anxious is more like it," I replied. I hadn't been back in Plegia since the war had ended. But, then again, neither had Chrom. "You?"

"Same. But we can't afford to mistrust these people too much, even if they are Plegian. Er, no offence."

"None taken. How much do you know about the new king?"

"King Validar?" He frowned. "Not much, truth be told. We decided against placing spies in Plegia for fear of causing another incident, so what information we have is limited." He broke out into a small smile. "But, still, I highly doubt he could be much worse than Gangrel was."

"I hope you're right..."

Frederick led the march up a rocky hill and straight through the castle gates. The Plegian guards bowed slightly as we passed, but it did nothing to subdue my anxiety.

When we entered the castle, we found ourselves in a large atrium, with a great set of stairs that obviously led up to the audience chamber. Standing before the stairs was a young woman, dressed in the traditional sable colours of Plegia. She bowed low as we drew near, and so it wasn't until she stood up straight again, revealing her smiling face, that recognition flared in my mind.

"Greetings, Exalt Chrom," the woman said. "Plegia welcomes you."

There were gasps and a few curses from the Shepherds behind us. Not even Chrom could keep the shock from his voice.

"Aversa!" he cried, earning him a sharp look from Frederick.

But if Aversa was offended by Chrom's tone, she didn't show it. "What can I say? It seems fate has designs for me yet." Her eyes flickered briefly to me, before moving back to Chrom as he spoke again.

“You serve the new king, then? This...Validar?”

She nodded. “I do.”

Surprisingly, it was Frederick who commented next. “They say he worships Grima...”

“Why yes, of course he is Grimleal. We are both believers. My liege often says it was his faith that got him through, after Gangrel's passing. It was a *difficult* time...” She bowed her head low, as though to demonstrate her respect for the late king. But she failed to hide the little smirk that appeared on her face. When she lifted her head once more, she had composed herself. “But he kept order where there might have been chaos. We had meant to arrange an official visit to Ylissol, but, well...”

“Perhaps you would show us to the audience chamber?” Frederick said.

The Grimleal woman nodded once more. “Of course, sir. Do you intend to bring all of your... associates with you?” She gestured somewhat elegantly to the remainder of the Shepherds, who were trailing behind us.

“I do,” Chrom replied firmly.

“Then, please, right this way.”

She led us up the stairs, into an even larger chamber, whose ceiling stretched up higher than I would have imagined from the outside. The long room and high ceiling sparked a strange feeling within me.

“Is this...a cathedral?” I asked Aversa.

She turned to me and gave me a mysterious smile. “Why, yes, Sir Tactician. Before this settlement was a fortress, it was place of worship for the Grimleal. It is said that this island was one of Grima's roosts.”

I suppressed an involuntary shudder.

Standing within the audience chamber was a tall, thin man wearing long, black robes. He stood with his back to us, but he turned when he heard our footsteps. His face was as thin as the rest of his body, and he had a long, pointed beard. He smiled in a sinister manner and spoke:

“An honour to finally meet you, *sire*. I am Validar, king regnant of Plegia.”

I flinched slightly upon hearing the man's cold voice. Why did it sound so familiar? And then, just as Aversa had done a few minutes before, the Plegian King's glanced briefly at me as I stood beside Chrom. Our eyes met, and I winced as a surge of memories broke free from my subconscious. I had seen this man – in fact, I had known him well – a long time ago. He had stood over me as I had practised magic, taught me all about spellcraft and trained me in the ways of Dark Magic. Worked my young and frail body night and day until I was ready. Ready for...what?

But worse than that, I remembered when I had seen this man last: standing over the bleeding corpse of Emmeryn as he laughed and laughed.

Validar, the king of Plegia. My father.

“The honour is mine, good king...”

My mind swirled with surfacing memories that had long been repressed after years spent in Ylisse

trying to forget the horrors of the desert kingdom. How much had I forgotten?

My head throbbed with pain as I tried to control the sudden flow of memories, just as Validar spoke once again. This time, to me.

“And you must be Sir Robin.”

“...Y-You know of me, sire?” I croaked.

The Plegian King smiled a smug little smile. “Why, the whole *world* knows of Ylisse's master tactician!” He stepped forward, drawing closer to me. “And indeed, I see the sparkle of wisdom in your eyes...”

I met his gaze and stared intently into Validar's eyes, trying to convey what I knew. It seemed to work; he stopped trying to move closer. He surveyed me with his cold, dark eyes.

“Indeed,” the king whispered, before collecting himself again. “Now, then. To business.”

He clicked his fingers and Aversa appeared at his side with a scroll of parchment. The king's aide unfurled the scroll and read from it. “Plegia can offer no soldiers, but will provide eight hundred warships and two hundred transports. In addition, we would be pleased to fully fund the campaign against Valm.”

This information was so surprising, I nearly forgot about the other revelations I had just received. The shocked whispers and suspicious murmurs from behind me reflected my thoughts on the matter.

“That is...surprisingly generous of you, milord,” Frederick said. “We could not ask for more, quite literally. You offer most *all* of your assets.”

Validar wringed his hands in a gesture of apology. “I would give troops as well, but our army remains in shambles from the last war. I trust the gold and ships will suffice as a sign of our commitment to the cause?”

We weren't exactly in a position to refuse an offer of this scale. I exchanged a brief glance with Chrom, before he turned back towards the Plegian king.

“Of course it will,” he replied. “Thank you, King Validar.”

“The honour is ours, my prince,” Validar wheedled. “I look forward to building a strong bond between our two nations.”

“As do I.” Chrom paused, before saying, “Then, if there's nothing else? My men and I must hurry back to Port Ferox.”

Validar smiled in that insidious manner. “Of course, dear exalt. We wouldn't want to keep the Feroxi waiting.” He clicked his fingers again and said, “Aversa. Please escort our noble guests to the exit.”

But Chrom held up a hand to stop her. “That's alright, King Validar. We know the way out.”

Validar hesitated, before bowing his head once more. “Of course, Exalt Chrom. We wish you a safe journey, and all the best in your campaign overseas.”

Chrom nodded in return. “Farewell.”

We all turned our back on the Plegian King and left the audience chamber via the stairway. I walked alongside Chrom, giving me a chance to whisper in his ear. “You don’t trust them.”

He turned his head, allowing him to whisper back. “Not at all. I don’t trust this Validar person any more than I trusted Gangrel. It doesn’t help that Aversa was here, either. But I see no reason for us to mistrust their *gift*. They gave us everything they had and didn’t ask for anything in return.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Eight hundred ships and not a single soldier.”

He grimaced. “I’ll admit, it *is* rather suspicious. But it’s exactly what we need to combat Valm, according to your own estimations. As much as I hate to deal with Plegians, they’re the only ones who have a full fleet ready and waiting for battle. I suppose we were fortunate that they were so willing to give up their ships.”

“Hmm...”

By the time we made it back to the dock, night had fallen, the fog had rolled in and our ferryman was refusing to take us across. The strait between Carrion Isle and the Feroxi mainland was a treacherous one, filled with jagged rocks and boulders that posed a serious threat to the boat. Although skilled, the ferryman had no way of seeing the rocks during the dark, foggy evening. And so, we would have to stay the night on Carrion Isle.

“Can’t we just go back to the fortress?” Lissa whined as the tents were being set up.

Chrom gave her a look. “Are you *sure* you want to do that? You think that Validar will welcome you in with open arms?”

The princess shuddered. “Never mind. That king creeps me out.” She sighed. “But this camping makes me long for my cosy bed back in Ylissol.”

Frederick spoke up. “I believe it was *you* who insisted on coming with us, milady.”

Lissa pouted, prompting Chrom to bark a laugh. “It’s just for one night, Lissa. We’ll set out at dawn and reach Port Ferox before dusk.”

She sighed again. “Fine. But will someone help me set up this tent, please?”

Lon’qu appeared at her elbow and took her through the steps. Luckily, I had already fixed my own tent. I bid everyone goodnight before sinking down into my bed, pulling the covers up around my neck and closing my eyes.

But it didn’t work.

Long after the campsite had fallen silent, I was still tossing and turning beneath the sheets. My mind was still a whirl of thoughts and fears that kept me awake through the night; anxiety at being back in Plegia once again, shame and guilt at keeping my father’s identity from Chrom and the others, and dread of the oncoming war.

I groaned as I sat up in the bed and pushed the covers off. *Perhaps*, I thought, *a walk will clear my head?* I pulled my clothes back on and left the tent, walking as quietly as I could away from the camp. I found a nearby hill, which I climbed and sat down near the summit. The chill night air did indeed have a calming effect on my nerves. It wasn’t until a short, snapping sound came from behind me that I felt fear once again.

I leapt to my feet. “Who’s there?”

“...Robin...”

I drew my sword, just as a bright light burst into being before me. I cried out, leaping backwards and away from the sudden flash of light. But, when the light faded away, there was a tall, slender figure left standing in a circle of burnt grass.

“I have been waiting for you, Robin,” Validar said.

His sudden appearance had surprised me. But then I remembered the evening of Emmeryn’s assassination – how this man had teleported into her chamber before dealing the fatal blow.

I gathered myself quickly. “I didn’t think you were going to come here,” I told him.

“How could I pass up the chance to reunite with the boy who was taken away from me so long ago?”

His words sickened me, as they confirmed what I had suspected for so long without any decisive evidence. I glared at the Plegian king and said, “My mother warned me about you. She hoped that we would never meet.”

A malicious smile crept across Validar’s face. “Oh, I’m sure. She always did think she was in the right, my dear wife. I take it, since you are here, that the curse took its toll on her life?”

I snarled. “So it’s true: you *did* lay the curse that killed her!”

But my father shook his head. “No, I’m afraid you are mistaken. Members of the High Order of the Grimleal swear to give their lives in devotion to the Fell Dragon. Every person who joins the order must take this oath. Breaking it results in a curse most foul being laid upon the traitor. She knew what her fate would be that night when she stole you from your crib. It was not I who cursed her.”

“She wouldn’t swear an oath like that. I...I know she wouldn’t. She *couldn’t*.”

He raised an eyebrow at my frail words. “No? And yet, when the offer was made for her to become a part of the High Order, she leapt at the chance to serve Grima. She couldn’t have married a high-ranking member such as me without joining. Believe what you want to believe, but your mother was Grimleal through and through.”

I tried to slow my frantic breathing, trying to calm myself after hearing his cruel words. “She changed. The Elia I knew would never choose to serve Grima. Never!” I shouted the last word, sending a nearby roosting group of ravens winging up into the night sky.

Validar frowned. “Hmm...indeed. She did seem to be so loyal. And yet, a *true* member of the Grimleal would never have acted in the way she did.” He waved his hand. “It matters not. She served her purpose as best she could.”

I scowled at this man – my father – feeling a tumult of emotion swirling around inside me. Shame, anger and rage...but also disappointment.

“She told me you were Grimleal...but I never would have realised that you were the Hierophant himself.” I grinned, thinking that the deduction I had made would surprise him. But Validar simply laughed.

“*Hierophant?!!*” he cried through his laughter. “Oh, no, my dear boy. You are mistaken. I am not the Hierophant.”

I frowned in confusion. “W-what?”

The king laughed once more. “I don’t know where you gained your knowledge of the Grimleal’s hierarchy, but you were misinformed. Although I am the *de facto* leader of the Grimleal, the Hierophant is a different position of power altogether. It is reserved for a very special person: one that can only be born once a millennium.” He paused. “My bloodline – *our* bloodline - reaches back through the eons. In fact, the progenitor of our bloodline was none other than the Fell Dragon – Grima!”

My stomach lurched. “What?! How...how can that be?!”

“The Fell Dragon feared the power that could match his own: that of the wretched *Naga*.” He spat the name of the Divine Dragon that was so worshipped in Ylisse. “To that end, he enacted a plan to create a mortal vessel worthy of housing his soul in the event that he was defeated. He briefly assumed a human form and sired children with as many loyal subjects as he could. One of those Children of Grima was our ancestor.

“Down through the centuries, many of the bloodlines of the Children gradually became diluted and impure. Only *our* family kept the blood of Grima untainted by marrying those of suitable dark power. All with the intention of one day creating a vessel worthy of housing the Fell Dragon’s soul: the very Heart of Grima!” he declared. “That is the *true* nature of the Hierophant!”

“That’s...” I couldn’t put the thought into words. I had never heard of anything so sick: a selective breeding program enacted down through the generations, all in service to a dead god.

He tilted his head as he gazed at me. “But all of their work has not gone to waste. You see, although your mother swore to give her life in service to Grima, what we truly desired was her *body*.”

My throat suddenly felt very dry. “No...”

Validar raised his arms to the night skies in triumph. “The child she bore, with my blood – that of the Fell Dragon – flowing through his veins, was the one that the Grimleal has been seeking for all these years.”

“It’s not true,” I whimpered. “It’s not true.”

A manic grin had spread across Validar’s face. He pointed one of those long, claw-like fingers at me as he exclaimed, “*You*, my son, are the Hierophant!”

“NO!” I bellowed.

“You cannot deny your fate! You are the intended vessel of our lord and master, the Fell Dragon! The Mark of Grima emblazoned on your hand reveals the truth!”

I sank to the ground, unable to stand any longer. “This...this can’t be real...” How could I be Grima? The enemy of the halidom, the enemy of everything that Chrom, Lissa, Emmeryn and all of my other friends held dear.

But, just then, the meaning of Validar’s words sank in, and I looked upwards to meet his eye once more. “You said ‘intended vessel’.”

He blinked. “Ah, it seems that I did.”

I rose, legs still shaking unsteadily. “What, exactly, did you mean by that?”

My father swallowed nervously. “Well...that is...”

“Tell me!” I roared.

“...Very well,” he muttered. “You see, there is a very specific ritual: the Rite of the Fell Dragon, it’s called. It entails the transferring of the Heart of Grima into the chosen vessel. It was intended to be performed on the eve of your fourth birthday.” His face grew dark. “However, your damnable mother...she betrayed us, stole you from your crib, and fled with you in the night! Because of that, our efforts were rendered fruitless.”

I stared at the man who was my father, mouth slightly open. “Then...you mean...I’m *not* Grima?”

“No, my son; you are just a man, albeit one enhanced by dark magic and generations of planned breeding. Haven’t you ever wondered why you acquire new skills and talents with such ease?”

“...Is that the truth?”

“Pardon?”

“The ritual was left unperformed. Is that the truth?” I left a cold, dangerous pause between each word.

Validar stared at me for a brief moment, before smiled and slowly inclining his head. “It is.”

Relief surged through me and I felt my body sag. “Then this changes nothing. Thank the gods.”

“I don’t know why you’re behaving so joyously at this news. You could become a god, you know. Doesn’t the thought of sheer omnipotence tempt you?”

I hesitated. “I’d be lying if I said that it didn’t. But I have no need for omnipotence. I have friends, loved ones, people who care for me. I have somewhere I belong. That’s all that I need in my life right now.”

My father sneered. “I see that your mother has poisoned your mind against me.”

“It wasn’t just her,” I said. “All of the people I’ve met during my time in Ylisse, and Ferox, too. They matter more to me than any power in the world.”

The king sighed. “Such naiveté. You believe that your ties to your companions can overcome your destiny.” He straightened, gazing imperiously at me. “But nothing can deny fate. You *will* become the Fell Dragon in time. That, I promise you.”

I glared right back at him. “Just try it. I’ll never become Grima. Not even if the world came crashing down around me.”

Validar smirked. “Is that so? I wonder, though, how your *friends* would react if they knew of your identity as the Hierophant, the very vessel of Grima? Or that your father was the king, the man who murdered their former exalt?”

I stiffened. “Th-that wouldn’t matter in the slightest!” I said, far too quickly. “They trust me, as I trust them.”

“*Liar.*”

“A-after all,” I went on, ignoring the voice in my head, “they didn’t care that I was Plegian, or that my parents were Grimleal. What difference would it make to them that my father is a maniacal

servant of the Fell Dragon, or that I was once intended to be his vessel?" I tried to keep my voice level, but my anxiety seemed to creep out from between the words.

Validar surveyed me for some time, before saying. "Is that really true, I wonder? Perhaps I should inform them, all the same?"

I stepped forward. "I can't let you do that."

Validar bared his teeth. "Then you admit that my words will have an effect on your *trusted* companions?"

"N-no. Never. They'd never believe you. They don't even trust you as it is."

"Maybe so. But what if I told you that I had a spy among your troops?"

I tensed. "What?!"

"With but a word from me, the spy will reveal all I have told you here tonight, and more. Even your staunchest advocate will turn on you. That, I can guarantee."

I felt sick to my stomach. "P-please..."

Validar's eyes widened. "Oh...? Are you...begging, my son?" He tutted in disapproval. "Now, now, we Grimleal do not beg and plead like worthless curs. I will keep this information secret...as long as you return the favour."

I gritted my teeth. "You would blackmail your own son?"

He chuckled. "Believe me, that is *far* from the most despicable action I've undertaken in my years. But yes. This is blackmail."

My body was weak and tired; exhausted from all these revelations and horrible truths. I didn't want to fight any more. I couldn't.

"...Name your demand, *father*."

"Oh, nothing major, I assure you," Validar said, displaying that malicious smile once again. "But first, I must inform you of an important detail. It concerns the trinket your exalted friend bears."

"The Fire Emblem?" I should have known.

"Indeed. I observed the Emblem when the exalt brought it before me this evening. Hadn't you noticed the empty slots upon its face?"

I *had* noticed them, but I had paid them no mind.

Validar took my silence as a cue to continue. "Long ago, there were five Gemstones that accompanied the Fire Emblem. Without them, the Emblem remains incomplete. As you have no doubt observed, only one Gemstone is currently in its place in the Fire Emblem: Argent. The location of the remaining four is unknown."

"And you want me to find these Gemstones?"

"Correct. You have your father's wits, my boy."

"Don't you *dare* compare me to you," I hissed.

“Temper, temper,” he reprimanded me. “Unless you want me to discipline you?” His eyes flashed.

“...Where can I find these Gemstones?”

Validar relaxed. “As I have said, their whereabouts are still unknown to me. But I have no doubt that you and that Chrom boy will have more success in acquiring them than I have. After all, he *is* the successor of the Wretch-King who once wielded the Emblem.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You refer to King Marth as the ‘Wretch-King’?”

“You disapprove of this epithet?”

“I find it to be a tad...immature.”

Validar dismissed the argument with a wave of his hand. “It matters not. You *will* find the Gemstones and you *will* return here with the Emblem in hand once you have done so. You know what will happen if you refuse.”

“And what if I fail?” I asked. “I’m sure you’re aware that we’re about to begin a war with the Valmese Empire. A war in which the odds seem to be stacked against us.”

“You have overcome dangerous odds before,” Validar observed. “I doubt you will fail. But, if the war ends in Valm’s favour, we have a secondary plan. And not even the Conqueror himself can defy fate. You will live, in order to fulfil your destiny.”

I glanced up at my father. “Someday, when you least expect it, I will find you. And then I will kill you. I swear it.”

Validar gave one final, mocking laugh. “Perhaps. But *that* day is not *this* day. Go now. Return to your pathetic friends. And whenever you believe that they trust in you, that they care for you, just think of me and the words I have spoken here tonight. And know that you are wrong.”

With that, the blinding flash of light surged into being once again. When I opened my eyes, Validar was gone.

I walked back to the camp in a daze. I barely remember finding my tent. All I can recall is how my body shuddered in guilt and quivered in shame beneath the covers of my bed. I did not sleep at all that night.

Chapter 22

The next day, we returned north to Port Ferox. It had been arranged that the ships and transports would be delivered by sea to the port, but it still took nearly a week before they arrived. Until then, I was put in charge of overseeing the preparations for the upcoming war. I had to organise the troops, the ships, the provisions for the three-month trip across the sea, and more. It was tiring, but I was thankful for the task: it took my mind off of the horrific events that had occurred in Plegia. Validar's words and revelations were too terrible for me to bear to think about.

Fortunately, the Plegians had kept their end of the deal. The ships we had received were enormous, some even larger than the Valmese galleons that had attacked the town. They were also numerous – more than could possibly fit in the harbour. Although (thanks to the Feroxi) our troops numbered in the thousands, I sincerely doubted we would have enough to fill all the ships to capacity. Would we even have enough to sail them? The arrival of reinforcements from Ylisse and East Ferox a few days before we set sail was promising, but ultimately insufficient. After all, the Ylislean army had suffered massive casualties in the previous war. Most of the troops from Ylisse were young and inexperienced, in contrast to the veteran warriors Flavia had supplied.

Despite all that, morale was high as we set sail for Valm. In fact, it seemed like mine was the only dour face among the Shepherds. Apart from Tharja, naturally. Even Frederick and Phila were in relatively high-spirits. Chrom took command of the flagship, which turned out to be large enough to comfortably hold all of the Shepherds. The remaining troops had to be distributed among the other ships so that there were enough on board to sail each vessel. The problem was that there were simply too many ships. As a result, the majority of the ships in our fleet were manned by a bare-bones crew.

Naturally enough, I had to organise the cabin roster for the flagship. With a handful of exceptions, each cabin could hold up to three people. However, with the roster I had drawn up, most of the ship's cabins were being inhabited by only two people. Chrom, as the captain, had a cabin all to himself. Me, being the mere tactician, had to share with one other Shepherd. It was going to be a long journey west: I would need to choose a cabinmate that wouldn't drive me insane if I had to live with them for upwards of three months. After some deliberation, I chose Donnel.

"Why'd you pick me, Robin?" he had asked on our first day aboard the ship. "You were in charge o' the cabins, right? You could've picked anyone to be your cabinmate."

I gave him a grin, delighted to be given a chance to explain. "It's simple," I exclaimed. "I used a process of elimination amongst all of the Shepherds. Firstly, for obvious reasons, I eliminated every female from the list. Next, I went through each male Shepherd, one-by-one, and thought about whether or not they would irritate me if I shared a cabin with them for the entirety of the journey. I narrowed the choice down to five individuals: Henry, Gaius, Kellam, Vaike and you, Donny. Henry is a light sleeper, you see, and he'd probably just keep me awake every night by laughing to himself. Gaius would proceed to hide sweets all around the cabin, so I'd be walking around with toffee stuck to the bottom of my boots for weeks. I'd probably trip over Kellam's armour. Or Kellam, himself. And Vaike snores." With a flourish, I declared, "Therefore, you, Donny, are the ideal candidate for sharing my cabin with!"

He blinked. "Huh. I...think I get it. Well, uh, thanks. I guess..."

I let a serious look cross my face. "Now, Sir Donnel, I must tell you this: there is to be no funny business with Nowi in this cabin while I'm around. Do I make myself clear?"

The young man's face reddened. "Wh-wha'?! No, Robin, N-Nowi and I...we...we wouldn't..."

I let the act drop. “It’s alright, Donny, I’m just joking. I know you’d never do something like that.”

Donnel smiled in a sheepish manner. “R-right. I gotcha, Robin.” He gestured over his shoulder, pointing the way out of the cabin. “I’m gonna go ‘splore the ship a little bit. You wanna come with me?”

I shook my head. “No thanks, Donny. I’m perfectly comfortable right here, for now.” I reclined on the bunk bed, stretching my arms back behind my head. “I’ll see you later,” I told him, giving him a brief smile.

He nodded, before leaving the cabin. I felt my smile fade as I was left alone with my thoughts.

“Putting on a brave face, I see.”

I grumbled, having been dreading the inevitable return of the voice.

“Just another set of lies to tell.”

“So, it didn’t really matter who I picked to be my cabinmate,” I muttered. “After all, I’ve already got the world’s most irritating companion stuck inside my head.”

“Come, now. It could be worse. At least I don’t snore.”

I felt a smile tug at my lips. “It’s not like you to joke,” I said.

“Perhaps you’re rubbing off on me?”

“I *do* have a remarkable wit.”

“It seems we share similar natures.”

I dropped the smile. “I’m *nothing* like you.”

“No? But you are me. As I am you.”

“I was hoping that the trip to Plegia had shut you and your nonsense up for good. You’re not me, no matter what you may think.”

“Then who do you say I am? If I’m not you, then why am I lurking around in your head?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’m insane. After everything that I’ve learned over the last few days, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Now *look who’s spouting nonsense. How can you ever accept yourself if you can’t even accept me?*”

I gritted my teeth. “Oh, it’s going to be a *long* journey west.”

The sun was blazing down on the deck of the flagship. Not even the strong, easterly breeze that propelled the fleet forward could ease the unbearable heat.

“Too hot...” I gasped through parched lips.

It had been just over a month since we had left Port Ferox. We had set sail at the outset of summer, and by now it was the height of the season. Every day was a struggle to stay cool. All of the men (and a handful of the women) were forced to strip down almost to their smallclothes for most of the day. Working around the ship, on deck or below, was a nightmare. On this particular day, I had to be coaxed out of my cabin and brought up to the deck, away from my books and tomes. A group of some of the Shepherds were training and sparring on the main deck. I was intending to join them, but the heat was too intense. And so, for some time, I just lingered around on the forecastle deck and observed the training.

There was a pair of fighters sparring in the centre of the main deck: Gaius and Frederick. I wasn't used to seeing Frederick fighting away from his horse, but he was firmly holding his own against the smaller, faster man. To my amusement, and possible envy, there was a crowd of women gathered on the deck, watching the ongoing fight intently.

Married women, a few of them, I noted. Hell, even *Phila* was there, standing near the back and hiding in the shade. Perhaps she wasn't as prim and proper as she pretended to be.

A set of footsteps came from behind me, tapping against the wooden deck. I didn't bother turning around, and so I was taken by surprise when a pair of hands slapped me on my naked back, causing me to yelp quietly. Giggling from behind me caused me to turn to see Lissa and Henry doubled over with laughter.

"That wasn't funny!" I snapped, but I was nonetheless unable to keep the grin off of my face. "Your hands are cold!" I paused. "Actually, could you do that again?"

Lissa, who was wearing a pale yellow corset that accentuated her curves, grinned back at me. "Sorry, Robin, but you only get one freebie."

Henry chuckled. "Feeling the heat?"

"Same as you, no doubt," I commented, gesturing to his naked torso. It was the first time I had seen Henry without his robes on. His skin was sickly pale and dotted with numerous, faded scars. His frame was slender, like my own, and bones jutted out at odd angles from beneath his flesh.

"What, you mean this?" He poked absent-mindedly at his belly. "I only took my clothes off to fit in. All the other guys were doing it. I don't actually feel the heat."

I gaped. "Seriously?"

He stuck out a hand towards me. "Feel."

I grabbed hold of his arm, and nearly instantly let go. "You're as cold as ice!"

The Dark Mage grinned. "I'm always like this. I tell ya, it sure made it easier growing up in the desert! Nya ha ha!"

"Oooh!" Lissa cooed, as she leaned over the railing at the edge of the forecastle deck. "I didn't know there was a duel going on."

"It's not a duel," I told her. "They're just sparring."

"Still makes for an *excellent* view." Her eyes gleamed.

I snorted. "What would your husband think if he could see you now?"

"He's right there, actually." She pointed towards Lon'qu, who was skulking around near the main

mast. He too, had discarded his usual garments in favour of nothing more than a small pair of breeches. Lissa called out to him, and he glanced up to see her waving. He smiled.

“You know,” Henry muttered, “I still can’t get used to ol’ Lon’qu looking so cheerful.”

“Aw, he’s a big softy once you get to know him.”

Lissa’s attention returned to the sparring. Frederick and Gaius were standing apart, slightly hunched over in fatigue. Sweat was pouring down their half-naked bodies, which glistened in the midday sun.

“It’s very unladylike to drool,” I whispered into the princess’s ear, prompting her to blink and shake her head rapidly.

“I wasn’t drooling,” she lied.

The two men shook hands before departing the centre of the deck.

“Never thought I’d see the day that Frederick would shake the hand of a known thief,” I muttered.

It wasn’t long, to Lissa’s delight, that two more men appeared on the scene. One of the men was wielding an axe, while the other held a lance. I recognised the axe-wielding Shepherd as Donnel, just as Lissa gasped from beside me.

“Is that *Donny*?!” she cried. “I never knew he was so...so...”

“Burly?” Henry suggested.

“Rugged! I mean, he used to be so...so...”

“Scrawny?” I prompted.

“Lean! And now, look at him. I wouldn’t have even realised it was him if it weren’t for that old, tin pot on his head. Nowi’s a lucky girl.” She paused. “But, who’s the other guy?”

The lance-bearing Shepherd was tall and well-built, with dark hair and a round face. He made the first strike against Donny, moving his weapon faster than I would have believed. The pair began to spar.

“I...I think it’s Kellam,” I murmured.

Lissa gaped. “*Really*?! Wow...I mean, uh...” She blinked. “I never noticed he was so *big*.”

I shook my head. “Me neither.”

“No? You’ve never seen his with his armour off?” she asked me curiously.

“A few times,” I admitted. “But not recently. He’s grown.”

Henry laughed. “I guess you and me are the only skinny guys on this boat, Robin! Nya ha ha!”

I frowned. “Is that Olivia I see in the crowd down there?”

Henry stopped laughing.

“*Even I would say that was a low blow. A tad insecure, maybe?*”

Shut up.

The Dark Mage peered down at the group that had gathered around Donnel and Kellam's duel. "Huh. *It is* her."

The pink-haired woman seemed to be enjoying the event in much the same way that Lissa was. Not that they were alone: most of the female Shepherds that were present could hardly contain their excitement.

In the sweltering heat, not even Donnel and Kellam could spar for long without overexerting themselves. Eventually, they stepped away from each other and let two more men take their place. Lissa gasped excitedly when Lon'qu and Chrom stepped forward, drawing their swords.

"Give him hell, honey!" she bellowed down at her husband, to the amusement of the gathered Shepherds.

But just before the duel could begin, Frederick appeared beside Chrom. He leaned in and whispered something into the exalt's ear. Chrom's face grew solemn, and he nodded. His eyes moved upwards, locking with mine. He jerked his head slightly, and I nodded in confirmation.

"Is something wrong?" Lissa asked as I made to leave.

"I hope not," I told her.

I joined Chrom, Frederick and Phila in the captain's cabin.

"This had better be bloody important," I grumbled when I entered.

Frederick gave one of his scowls that he only ever reserved for me. "You're the tactician of this army. It is your *duty* to attend every one of these strategy meetings."

"Doesn't mean I have to enjoy it," I shot back at the knight. He opened his mouth to reprimand me further, but was interrupted by Chrom.

"That's enough, Frederick." The exalt raised an amused eyebrow at me. "I'm sure Robin's just exhausted from the heat."

"You can say *that* again," I said in agreement.

"All this fine weather is good for you, Robin. Gods know you need a bit of colour on your skin."

"Hey!" I grunted. "I'll have you know that my pale complexion is a genetic problem. My mother had pale skin and so did her parents before her. I would imagine," I added.

"With respect," Phila cut in, "we should turn to the matter at hand."

"I want to wait until the khans arrive," Chrom told her. "They should be here any moment."

I frowned. "You sent for Flavia and Basilio?"

He nodded. "They're just as much a part of this army as the rest of us."

Sure enough, the door opened again a minute later and in strode the pair of khans.

“Exalt Chrom,” Flavia said, “you sent for us?”

Basilio scratched the top of his bald head. “Can’t an old man have a peaceful afternoon nap anymore?”

Flavia seemed to be about to snap at her counterpart, but Frederick smoothly stepped in. “Our scouts have just reported back to us from the head of the fleet. The Valmese are approximately one day away from our current position. And, what’s more, the pegasus knights say the Valmese fleet matches ours, ship for ship.”

I blinked. This news was better than I had anticipated. The naval might of the Valmese was something to be feared, true. But perhaps I had overestimated their volume? The beginnings of plans began to seed in my mind.

Chrom spoke up in the sudden silence. “Your tone tells me this is not good news.”

Frederick said what I had feared. “Their troops vastly outnumber ours. Our vessels are half-full, at best. But every Valmese ship is packed from stem to stern with soldiers.”

Phila stood beside him. “If our troops attempt to board them in a straight fight, we will be slaughtered.”

Flavia grunted. “We’ve little choice but to try anyway.” She thought for a moment, before saying, “Plegia had no men to spare, but they were generous with other supplies...including oil.” Her eyes fell upon me. “Perhaps a clever tactician could find a use for that.”

I was barely aware of the East-Khan’s words. “...Perhaps he could,” I murmured after a moment. Her statement was true: the report submitted by the Plegians upon our receiving of their fleet had confirmed as much. While I had overlooked the huge stocks of oil detailed in the report, I hadn’t failed to observe the vast number of barrels stored beneath the decks. Flavia’s suggestion sparked one of the growing ideas in my head.

She went on. “If we can put their ships to flame, they’d have nowhere to escape to. We could-”

“You could roast us all like hams!” Basilio exclaimed, interrupting the East-Khan’s musing. “Are you truly so eager to die, woman?!”

“Do you have a better idea, oaf?!” she snapped.

Chrom said, “Do we have any catapults stored below deck?”

Phila shook her head. “I’m afraid not, milord. The Plegians gave us no siege weapons of any kind.”

Flavia began pacing the cabin as she thought. “So the problem is that we have no catapults. How do we get the lit oil on their decks without our own ships being caught in the blaze?”

Once again, a spark of inspiration from Flavia. I could almost visualise the process as I spoke. “Unless we *want* our ships caught in the blaze...”

Basilio turned to me with incredulity in his eyes. “Why in the gods’ names would...?” He broke off, giving me a knowing look. “Well, I know better than to question Robin. Especially not when he has that look in his eyes. Gods save us from what he’s cooked up this time. Let’s just hope it’s not *us*!” He roared with laughter.

I felt it was time to speak up. “Chrom, I have an idea.”

“Those words from your mouth are music to my ears, Robin.”

“But for my plan to work we'll need to disrupt their chain of command. Our strongest team would need to board their flagship and kill their general. As our best captain I'd have you head the squad, but you *are* the exalt, so...”

Chrom's eyes flashed. “Yes, I *am* the exalt, so no one can order me *not* to go. I will lead the assault!”

Just as I'd hoped. “Then this plan truly stands a chance,” I said.

Chrom smiled at me. “So much has changed since we found you that day, under attack from those brigands. Hard to believe you determine the fate of our entire army now...our entire *people*. Destiny has a strange way.”

“I agree. Fate is on our side, Chrom. With that, we cannot fail.”

Basilio made a rumbling noise deep in his chest. “Hmm. So *that's* where you get your confidence from, eh? Well, far be it from me to doubt you, Robin. Us Feroxi will follow your lead.”

“Indeed,” Flavia said, nodding firmly. “You've proven yourself to be a worthy commander, Robin. We're placing our trust in you.”

I nodded. “Then listen up. This plan could be dangerous.”

Chrom snorted. “When are your plans *not* dangerous?”

I went on. “It'll involve the stocks of oil that Flavia mentioned. If we're lucky, and the gods are on our side, then we may be able to use this boon to our advantage...”

The remainder of that day was spent setting up the plan I had outlined. Everyone aboard the flagship was informed directly of the plan, but the rest of the fleet had to be told separately. Messengers were sent all around the fleet in order to spread the word. I was one of them. For the first time in my life, I rode on the back of a wyvern - Cherche's wyvern, to be exact - in order to travel between ships. By nightfall, my voice was hoarse from having repeated the details of the plan to scores of different crews on various ships. And I was exhausted, to boot. As we flew back to the flagship, a wave of dizziness came over me, and I slumped against the back of the female rider.

She glanced back over her shoulder at me. “Tired, Robin?”

I shook myself willing myself to stay awake. “I'm fine, Cherche. Don't worry about me.”

“Nonsense,” she said simply. “My dear master and his lady wife would never forgive me if I let you fall from Minerva's back. It is my *duty* to worry about you so.” The wyvern let out a keening roar. “Minerva worries about you also. She is ever so kind, don't you think?”

I nodded sleepily. “Alright then. Sure. I'll hold on extra tight.”

“My thanks.”

Darkness...

So cold...and confining...

We need...release...

The calls and moaning of the suffering surrounded me. Everywhere I turned my head, there was only darkness and tortured screams.

Release...us...

Let us go...

Let me...

LET ME GO!

The screams of the damned reached a deafening crescendo. I heard my own voice, raw and feeble from eons of disuse, join them in howling my agony.

“LET ME GO!”

“Robin!”

I lurched awake, coughing and gasping. I felt my hammock shake and sway beneath me, rocking from side to side as I thrashed.

“Robin?!” A voice called out to me.

I swivelled my head, and Donnel’s concerned face entered my field of vision.

“D-Donny...”

“Are y’alright?!”

I took a moment to breathe slowly, in and out. A glance down at my body showed my sheets, which were tangled around my limbs. My entire body was drenched with sweat. “Wh-what happened? How did I...? I thought I was...with Cherche?”

“You collapsed after you came back from your trip around the fleet,” the young man explained.

“You came down offa that big lizard and just...fainted. I carried you back here. That was a couple o’ hours ago.” His expression wavered. “Then, a few minutes ago, I was about to fall asleep when I heard you, uh, mutterin’ to yourself. I didn’t pay it no mind, but then you started saying ‘Let me go’ and squirmin’ around like a pig in mud. I got up and went over, but you started thrashin’ about and screamin’! I just *had* to wake you up, Robin.” He was clearly agitated.

“It’s alright,” I told him, trying to calm him down. “I...I’m alright now. Just a bad dream, that’s all.”

Donnel frowned. “Ain’t nuthin’ like no bad dream *I’ve* ever had.”

“Lucky you, then,” I muttered, before a thought struck me. “Donny...you said that when I started muttering in my sleep, you ‘didn’t pay it no mind’. Has this sort of thing happened before?”

He blinked. “Uh...well, now that you mention it...”

“Yes?”

“There’s been a few times when I heard you, uh, *moanin’* in the middle o’ the night. I...well, I figured you were...you know.” His expression grew sheepish. “Not that there’s anythin’ wrong with that. I just didn’t wanna interrupt or nuthin’...”

I felt my face get even hotter. “No! No, no, I wasn’t...I wouldn’t! I was just having more nightmares, that’s all,” I told him hastily. “This isn’t the first time I’ve had these kinds of dreams, you see.”

Relief flooded Donnel’s face. “Oh...great! Sorry, I guess I kinda jumped to conclusions.” His eyes moved away from mine, to a spot somewhere on the wall behind me. “But, you know...if you ever *do* need to do that sorta thing...I’d understand, you know?”

I spluttered. “Wh-what?! D-Donny, I would never do, er, ‘that sorta thing’ if you were in the room!”

“Uh, really?”

“Of course not! After all, *you* wouldn’t bring Nowi in here, either. Right?”

A relieved grin spread across the young man’s face. “Right! That makes sense. I getcha now, Robin.” His face grew sombre once more. “But, uh, you *are* okay now, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “I’m fine. Thanks for worrying about me, Donny. But, in future, you don’t have to wake me up if I start having a bad dream again, alright?”

“Y-you sure?”

“Yes. It’s better that way.”

“...Understood.”

“Good. Head on back to bed.”

He nodded, before turning around and trudging slowly back to his hammock. He yawned. “G’night, Robin.”

“Night.”

The cabin fell silent once again. I sighed quietly to myself. The dreams were getting worse. But I had an important battle to fight the next day; I couldn’t afford to lose a night’s sleep because of a nightmare.

I shuddered, preparing to brave another series of those horrific visions.

“...Thanks again, Donny,” I called out.

But he had already fallen asleep.

Chapter 23

The cry went up several hours after dawn, and the message was quickly spread from ship to ship, transmitting the information across the fleet: the Valmese were coming. Our flagship – which held all of the Shepherds – was positioned close to the front of our fleet, so by the time we were all awake and standing up on deck, we could clearly see the crimson sails on the horizon.

Chrom stood beside me on the forecastle deck as we looked out across the ocean, toward our foe. “The scouts are saying that the Valmese flagship is located near the forefront of their fleet, just as it is with ours.”

I nodded. “Perfect. Then we only need to break through the front line of ships to reach their commander. Once they’ve been taken out, we can commence with Phase Two.”

Chrom winced. “The tricky part.”

“Not if everyone does their jobs right,” I reassured him, ignoring the nervous twinge in my gut. “Our current priority is getting past those ships at the head of the fleet.”

“That’s what we have our mages for.” Chrom turned to face the four people that had lined up behind us: Ricken, Miriel, Henry and Tharja. “Once an opening appears in the fleet, it’ll be up to you all to get us through.”

Ricken nodded. “Got it.”

Tharja rolled her eyes and said, “Same as the explanation you gave us yesterday.”

Henry gave the gloomy Dark Mage a playful nudge. “Aw, c’mon! Cheer up! If we’re lucky, we’ll get a chance to burn up some ships before the day is out!”

Tharja’s eyebrows rose as she gazed thoughtfully off into the distance. “That *does* sound rather enjoyable.”

Henry giggled, not noticing or caring that Ricken was edging away from his Plegian companions.

Before long, the Valmese fleet was almost upon us. The ships at the front of our fleet were the first to be set upon. From our vantage point on the flagship, we saw soldiers in red armour leaping onto the decks of our ships and attacking the few people that were onboard.

I felt Chrom tense from beside me.

“They knew what was being asked of them when they volunteered to man those ships,” I said to him, my eyes not moving from the skirmish.

“I don’t like having to use people as a diversion,” the exalt said, through gritted teeth.

“We’re at war, Chrom. Sacrifices must be made.” I sighed quietly. “For what it’s worth...I, too, wish there was another way.”

“Then why didn’t you try and find it?”

“But there will be time for grieving later,” I ploughed on, not wanting to listen to the voice. “Keep an eye out for an opening.”

“...Alright.”

The battle between the ships at the front of either fleet seemed to drag on for hours. I knew that was because my mind was concentrating on finding a gap in the Valmese ranks. Just as outlined in the plan, the ships between us and the fleet's front had spread outwards, giving us a clear shot forwards. I just hoped that the Valmese wouldn't notice.

I was jolted out of my concerns when Chrom shouted, “There!”

My gaze followed his outstretched hand, spotting a single Valmese ship that had been pushed out of formation at the front of the fleet. Most of its crew had jumped onto one of our ships, leaving the vessel to drift slowly away. A gap had appeared in the Valmese vanguard, but it wouldn't be long before it was spotted and filled by one of our foes. It fell to us to use the window of opportunity to our advantage.

I spun around to face the gathered Shepherds. “Mages, ready!”

The four of them leaped to attention, taking up position behind the main mast. As one, they read the incantations from the tomes they carried, before thrusting their hands up towards the sails above their heads. The sails immediately billowed, filled with the magical gusts of wind, and the ship creaked into life as it surged forward.

“Positions!” I bellowed, and the Shepherds leaped into action. They filed in along the broadside of the ships, weapons already in hand.

By now, we were speeding towards the gap Chrom had pointed out. But, to my horror, I spotted a Valmese frigate making for the same gap, seeking to block our advance. It showed no signs of slowing, and indeed seemed to be aiming directly for us.

“It's going to ram us,” I realised, before hollering back over my shoulder. “Henry! Port bow!”

“Huh?” I heard the Dark Mage's confused voice. Then, “Oh, I see. Do you want me to burn 'em?”

“No. Just push them back!”

And so, our velocity was reduced as one of our mages stopped casting Elwind upon the sails. Henry was quick, though, and he hurried to the prow as fast as he could, already muttering the incantation. No sooner had he sprinted past me and Chrom than he shouted, and there was another gust of wind sent spiralling out of his hands, towards the enemy ship. It shot over the water and struck the sails of the approaching frigate. The frigate slowed to a halt only a short distance away from us, and we sailed straight past it.

Henry's hands were flickering with magic as he turned to me with a broad grin. “Should I hit them again?”

I glanced back at the frigate.

“...No, it's okay, Henry. Go join back up with the other mages, but be ready for any other resistance we may encounter.”

“Aye-aye!” Henry saluted, before sprinting back down to his position behind the mast.

“Do you see the Valmese flagship, Robin?” Chrom asked me, once the Dark Mage had departed.

I scanned the seas, my vision passing over the many crimson-sailed warships that now surrounded

us. It was difficult to miss the hulking dreadnought – complete with the Valmese emblem on its sails – that was the flagship.

“Yes, I see it. Do you think we’ll be able to take it?”

Chrom glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “Having second thoughts?”

“It’s in my nature to doubt, Chrom.”

He chuckled. “That’s true. But I know we can do it. It’s...”

“Our destiny?” I prompted.

“I was going to say ‘our only option’.” Chrom shook his head. “Be ready.”

I watched the nearing flagship like a hawk, making note of how the soldiers on board were positioned. In particular, I noticed the archers; our pegasus knights and other aerial fighters would be highly vulnerable. And, when the battle was taking place on the high seas, we would need all the aerial support we could get.

Worse still, I saw two smaller ships making their way towards us. They seemed to be acting as sentries for the flagship, defending it against any possible attackers. Already, they were preparing their boarding planks.

“Should we have the mages fend them off again?” Chrom asked, noticing where I was looking.

I shook my head. “No. That won’t keep them away for long. We’re better off letting them try to board us.”

Chrom’s eyes widened. “What? Why?”

“The flagship won’t attack us if we seem like a credible threat,” I explained. “If those two sentry ships attack us simultaneously, it’ll seem to the flagship as though we’re vulnerable. They’ll swoop in and try to take out our flagship in a *coup de grâce*. Little do they know who they’re dealing with.”

“I hope you’re right about this, Robin.”

“I always am,” I bragged.

“Except for that expedition we made to East Ferox two years ago,” Chrom reminded me, a smirk playing on his lips. “You know, when Anna tried to-”

“That doesn’t count!” I snapped. “Anything involving *her* doesn’t count.”

“Sure, sure.”

As tempted as I was to shove Chrom overboard, I thought better of it.

“Frederick,” I called to the knight, who had already mounted his horse. “You see the ship approaching on the starboard side? Man the gangplank when it arrives, and make sure that none of them get past.”

“Understood,” Frederick replied, with a curt nod.

“Phila, you stay with him. Provide healing magic if you have to. Just try to stay out of range of their arrows.”

“Yes, Sir Robin.”

I scanned the deck, before sighing. “I can’t see where Kellam is, but I want him to block off the other ship’s advance. Do as Frederick does, and you should be fine. Virion, I’ll need you to take out any mages or other dangerous foes that prove too much for Kellam, understood?”

“Crystal clear!” the archer cried.

“And bring Maribelle with you, just in case.” I turned to our two pegasus knights. “Sumia and Cordelia, take to the skies. From there, it’ll be up to you to swoop in where you feel you’re needed. Any gaps in our defence will need to be filled by you. The same goes for Cherche,” I said, nodding in the wyvern rider’s direction. “Everyone else, we’re taking the flagship. Find their commander and take him down as soon as you can. Then we can finally move onto the next phase of the plan. Are we clear?”

A roar of assent followed my words, and so Chrom lifted Falchion aloft and bellowed, “To arms!”

Everyone rushed to their positions, the majority of the Shepherds flocking to the port side of the ship, to where the Valmese flagship was now approaching, already extending its own gangplank. Within minutes, the two flagships had made contact. The Shepherds roared as they faced the oncoming horde, who hollered back. I hung around the back of the group, firing off spells whenever I saw an opening. The Valmese only had so many troops stationed on their flagship, and so, slowly but surely, the Shepherds advanced forwards over the gangplank, cutting down or blasting away any who stood in our way. The air was filled with noise – the sounds of blade clashing, of spears plunging deep into wooden planks, and the cries of agony as our foes were slain. Even so, I was certain I could hear Henry’s signature laugh over the din, as well as another sound that drew my attention.

“Robin!”

My head snapped around, searching for the source of the shrill cry for help. My eyes found Maribelle, waving frantically at me, in a manner she would have ordinarily found most undignified. Now, however, she was clearly in a panic. Kellam, who had held the gangplank thus far, fending off any soldier that tried to board our ship, was now being steadily driven back onto the deck. Virion was loosing arrow after arrow at the advancing Valmese, but it was proving to be a vain effort. At this rate, the enemy would break through the bottleneck we had formed, and would spill out onto our flagship. I couldn’t let that happen.

A passing glance at the far side of our flagship showed me that Frederick was having much the same problem as Kellam. The troops facing the knight had brought reinforcements, which consisted mostly of archers. Thus, Phila was kept away from healing Frederick, who was looking worse for wear.

But what could I do? Most of the Shepherds, by now, had boarded the Valmese flagship. Returning to aid our allies would mean losing our advantage, and being forced back to where we started. We could be certain that the Valmese wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. If we fell back now, we would never regain the upper hand.

I began to panic, searching desperately for someone – *anyone* – who could help my friends.

Oh, Gods...

“Calm down. You’re not going to be able to save anyone when you’re this worked-up.”

But what can I do?!

“You can start by turning around and stabbing the foolish craven who’s attempting to sneak up on you.”

I spun, sword in hand, and plunged it into the person behind me. The Valmese soldier choked, blood spilling out of his mouth, before I wrenched my blade from his gut and he collapsed to the deck.

“Now, take a few deep breaths and think. Who are you forgetting about that can fly in and help those imbeciles back on the ship?”

What, the pegasus knights? Those archers will shoot them down without a second thought.

“Open your eyes, idiot. I’m talking about the quiet man, the dandy and his loudmouthed wife. You see any archers facing them?”

Well...no, I realised with a jolt. The ship whose crew were attempting to break through Kellam’s guard had no archers onboard.

“Then you know what you should do. Oh, and duck, by the way.”

I quickly sank into a crouch as another Valmese soldier drove his spear through the space where my head had been only a moment before. A quick whisper of words and he was sent rocketing off the ship by a wind spell, tumbling head-over-heels into the brine below.

Hurriedly, I scanned the skies for the pegasus knights. Instead, I found Cherche hovering just above the main mast of the Valmese flagship. Her mount, Minerva, was keeping a keen eye out for any approaching Valmese attackers.

I called up to the woman. “Cherche!”

If she didn’t hear me, Minerva did, for the wyvern craned its neck as though listening to something. Cherche leaned down, tilting her head towards the beast’s fearsome maw, before nodding. With a flick of the reins, the pair swooped downwards towards the deck, knocking aside a few Valmese troops unlucky enough to be in their way.

“What is it, Robin?” the Rosanne woman asked, in her usual, sweet voice.

“Kellam’s in trouble,” I quickly explained. “He needs help. Can you make it over to him?”

She smiled serenely. “Of course I will.” She took hold of the reins again, cooing at her wyvern. “Come along, Minerva. We’re going on a quick jaunt back to the ship.”

And with that, Minerva soared up into the air once more, aiming for the gangplank between the sentry ship and our own. I would have to trust the servant that she would perform her task.

“But what about Frederick?” I hissed, remembering the cavalier’s plight. “Those archers will shoot down any pegasus or wyvern that comes near.”

The voice in my head groaned in exasperation. *“Come, now. Do you need me to do all the work for you? Once again, you’re forgetting someone. Someone who can fly through the air without fear of being wounded by arrows.”*

I cursed my stupidity. *Of course! Nowi’s scales are practically impenetrable. But where is she?*

She wasn’t difficult to find. She was fighting alongside Donnel, who was holding back an entire squadron of Valmese with his axe. Nowi was guarding his rear, holding off any who would

approach the boy from behind. As I rushed towards the pair, I marvelled at how well the former farm boy could fight. He'd come a long way from swinging a pike around. Of course, he had still kept the rusted pot he used for a helmet.

"Nowi! Donny!"

Both of them glanced briefly in my direction when I called, but they were too busy dealing with the Valmese to join me. Instead, I caught up with them, and began explaining the situation.

"Frederick is still holding the gangplank, but he's hurt. And Phila can't get close enough to heal him because of the Valmese archers."

"I getcha," Donnel said, with a nod. "You want Nowi to take down them archers."

"Me?" Although she was in her dragon form, I could still hear the frown in the manakete's voice. "But, if I go over there, I won't be able to stay *here* with Donny! I can't let something happen to him!"

The boy blushed. "Sh-shucks, Nowi."

"It's fine," I promised them both. "I'll take your place, Nowi. You're the only one who can save Frederick! Please!"

"...Alright," she said, with a nod. "I'll go. Be careful, you guys!"

Like Minerva had done only a few minutes before, Nowi swooped upwards and over towards our flagship. I saw her blast a group of Valmese archers with her fiery breath before I was forced back into the action.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Donny?" I muttered through gritted teeth, as I stood back-to-back with the young man.

"Since we fought like this? Yeah, I reckon so."

I flicked through my Elfire tome, searching quickly for an unused page as an angry-looking Valmese soldier drew near. "Not that we've really *had* to. After all, you and Nowi make a dangerous pair, you know."

"Y-yeah..."

I heard the wistfulness in Donnel's voice, even as I prepared my spell. I launched the fireball into the soldier's chest, and he went down screaming. "Everything alright?" I asked.

"I...I reckon I love her, Robin."

"*Oh, just brilliant.*"

"I think she feels the same way about you, Donny," I said aloud, cutting down a mage who came too close.

"But...she's one o' them manaketes, and I'm just a..."

"*Do we really have time for this?*"

"A brave, young warrior?" I prompted him, causing him to splutter. "Come on, Donny. I'm sure Nowi's just waiting for you to sweep her off her feet."

“Off her talons, more like.”

“Y-you think so?” Donnel wondered, before lunging toward a heavily-armoured soldier. He cut through the armour like it was butter, causing the unfortunate Valmese man to howl in pain. Another swift strike finished him off. “But what about her...you know? She’s...”

I began to feel somewhat uncomfortable at the direction this conversation was heading in. But Donnel surprised me by bringing up a different concern.

“She’s over a thousand years old, Robin! And she still looks just like a pretty, little girl. What’s gonna happen when...I get older and she just stays the same?”

“I may vomit.”

Having had enough of the voice’s dry interjections, I said, “Donny, I don’t think now is really the time for this conversation. But, if you want my advice, I think you should just go for it. Tell her how you really feel. The longer you wait, the greater the gap between you two will get. Close the divide now, and I’m certain you’ll be able to stick together through it all.”

Just then, a cry went up around the ship. “Defend the general!”

“It seems that Chrom has crossed swords with the enemy leader,” I muttered to Donnel. “We’d better back him up.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

We followed the swarming Valmese as we cut our way towards the forecastle deck, where Chrom was facing down a stern-looking, balding man in blazing red armour.

“I am Chrom,” he said. “Exalt of Ylisse, and Scion of Naga. I demand that you surrender immediately.”

The balding man sneered. “You think your petty titles mean anything out here, on the open ocean? The only name that matters is that of Walhart, the Conqueror. And soon it shall be the only name that will *ever* matter!”

“We will die before we let Walhart take what’s rightfully ours,” Chrom swore. “Our homes, our families, our people. We will never be conquered by the likes of him!”

The general snarled. “Arrogant pup! The seas are my home, and they will be your grave! I shall put an end to your foolish attempt at insurrection right now!”

“Don’t count on it!” Chrom turned his head ever so slightly to the left, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. “To me, Robin!”

“I thought you’d never ask,” I muttered, as I took my place at his side. “Donny, guard those steps. Make sure no one interrupts us.”

“Yessir, Robin!” he chirped.

The general’s watery eyes moved from me to Chrom, and back again. “I see that the notion of honourable combat means nothing to you Ylisseans. You are too much of a coward to face me alone, exalt!”

Chrom lifted Falchion to the level of his shoulder. “Robin is my trusted comrade, and my friend. We’re two halves of the same whole. Without him, you’d be fighting merely a fraction of my true

strength.”

“That’s how we rationalise it, anyway,” I quipped, taking up my own combat stance.

“Sentimental nonsense,” the general said, as he raised his lance. “Very well. Let’s see how well these ‘two halves of the same whole’ fight.”

It was over surprisingly quickly, for all the general’s talk. Being so heavily armoured, he was unable to deal with my magic. Once a hole had been blasted into his plate mail, Chrom lunged and buried Falchion up to the hilt in the man’s flesh.

“Strike me down, and ten will take my place,” the Valmese general choked. His mouth crumpled up, before spitting out a wad of blood and mucus into Chrom’s face. “You...have...lost!”

Before Chrom could even react, I stepped forward and plunged my blade into the dying man’s eye. His howl of agony was cut short as his breath died away. I retrieved the sword, turning to meet Chrom’s concerned stare.

“He was dying anyway,” I muttered. “Better to finish him off quickly.”

Chrom gave a shaky nod, before saying, “I’m giving the signal.”

As Chrom made to address the Shepherds onboard the Valmese flagship, the voice spoke up again.

“You’re a liar. The only reason you killed that man so brutally was because he spat at Chrom.”

And so what if I did?

“It’s not that I don’t approve. Just pointing out how you’ve just been dishonest with your ‘other half’ again.”

“Shut up,” I grumbled, hoping that Chrom didn’t hear me.

“Their general has fallen!” the exalt shouted, his voice carrying on the cool sea breeze. “All units, return to our flagship! Fall back!”

There was a scurrying as the Shepherds retreated over the gangplank. What little Valmese troops left alive onboard their flagship were too stunned and lost without their general to react in time, and so we all made it safely back to our ship.

“Onto the second phase!” I cried, giving Chrom a quick nod.

“Alright.” He took a breath, before bellowing, “All appointed ships, change course! Head right at them! Ramming speed!”

We hurriedly sailed in the opposite direction to the ships that were now shooting past us, aiming directly for the Valmese fleet. The stench of oil wafted to me as the warships passed, and a score of soldiers leaped the divide between our ship and theirs. Suddenly, half of our entire fleet had been deserted, with only gallons upon gallons of oil occupying the vessels.

The mages had already lined up at the stern, facing the cluttered crowd of ships. As one, they chanted, summoning fireballs to each of them. And, again as one, they launched the flames directly at the ships.

Although this had all been part of my plan, what happened next was something not even I could

have accurately envisioned. The sight of so many ships erupting into an inferno in a matter of seconds was a rather frightful, but strangely beautiful sight. The sound, too, was almost deafening. The howls of the burning and dying were haunting, to say the least.

To my astonishment, I heard Frederick actually gasp. “It...worked! Gods above, it worked!”

I felt a firm, strong hand clap me hard on the back. “Only you could hatch such a brilliant scheme, Robin. Who else would desert half our vessels and turn them into flaming cannonballs?”

I turned to face the person who had spoken – Khan Flavia. She was looking at me with an expression of pride and pleasure.

“And there was still enough room on the remaining ships for all our troops,” she went on. “It was so simple, and yet the Valmese never saw it coming. They never considered anyone might be willing to sacrifice half a fleet.”

The West-Khan then stepped into my field of vision. “Of course, that means things are going to get a lot less roomy in here. Hope you people don’t mind, but Flavia and I brought along some of our men.”

Sure enough, a group of tough-looking, muscle-bound Feroxi soldiers stood behind the khans.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, West-Khan,” Chrom said. “After all, we still have several cabins left empty.”

“Perfect!” Basilio grinned as he sidled up to his counterpart. “Then the East-Khan and I will take one of those empty cabins. Preferably a cabin with one bed.”

Flavia glared at the big man. “Oaf! Just because of what happened *last* time...!”

I raised an eyebrow. “‘Last time’?”

Flavia’s head snapped towards me, and a smile lit up her face once more.

“Robin, old chum,” she said. “How about *you* share my bed tonight? Consider it returning the favour for your brilliant performance in today’s battle.”

I heard a few chuckles and whistles from the onlookers that had gathered on the deck after the battle. Although I could feel the colour rising in my face, I tried to prepare a cool-headed retort.

“No thank you, Khan Flavia. I doubt I could live up to the West-Khan’s famous reputation. Or yours.”

Flavia’s nostrils flared as she spun around. “*What* did you tell him, oaf?!”

Basilio raised his hands in mock surrender. “I may have let slip a few secrets after challenging Robin to an ale-drinking contest some years ago. Nothing major. I presume.”

The East-Khan turned back to face me again, her glare now fixed on me.

I tried a smile. “*It’s alright, Khan Flavia. I’m very good at keeping secrets.*”

And I choked, barely listening to the laughter of those around me. I hadn’t said that. It was the voice. It had used my mouth to speak through me again. What the hell was going on?

“At least I can trust *you* to keep your mouth shut, Robin,” Flavia grumbled.

“If only!” Basilio boomed. “You should’ve heard the things *he* told me after that contest. Things that would shame an old man’s heart.”

“I have to go,” I said suddenly. “Important...tactician business.”

I fled towards the hold, hearing the knowing giggles of a few of the Shepherds.

“I’ve never seen Robin so embarrassed,” Chrom muttered.

“He’s not usually one to walk away from a confrontation,” Stahl commented.

I shut them all out. Once I was out of sight, down in the hold, I broke into a run, not stopping until I reached my cabin door. I flung the door open, only to find another man lying in my hammock.

“Well, well,” Antonio said. “Isn’t *this* a surprise? Looks like you’re my new cabinmate, now.”

I struggled to keep my emotions in check. One eye twitched.

“Fine,” I said.

The Feroxi man grinned. “I don’t get a chance to see you in years, and the only thing you say to me is ‘fine’? Some friend *you* are.”

I rolled my eyes, sinking down into the spare, third hammock in the cabin. “What are you doing here?”

“I came with the khans,” he explained, lying back in the hammock. “Hopped onto this ship when the order came to jump decks. Brilliant plan, by the way. Devious.”

“I knew you’d appreciate it. The only thing I didn’t foresee was how long it would take for those burning ships to sink. We’ve essentially just blocked our passage into Valm. We can either sail around them, or wait until they’ve all been swallowed by the sea.”

“Hey, I suppose nobody’s perfect. And I doubt the Valmese will be coming back with another fleet anytime soon.” He groaned as he stretched out his tired body. “So, now, until we arrive in Valm, we can just relax, and let the roll of the tide and the whisper of the breeze sooth us.” He sighed happily.

“You *do* know that’s my hammock you’re lying in?”

“Of course I do.”

Chapter 24

The days drifted slowly by, onboard the Ylissean flagship. It took nearly a week before the Valmese fleet had been fully submerged under the waves. And so, after the battle on the high seas, it was a while before we could set sail again. And the shores of Valm still seemed a long way away.

Meanwhile, I had to deal with having a new cabinmate. A particularly chatty, irritating cabinmate.

“So, Robin, you’re...what, twenty-two, now?”

I groaned, knowing full well where the conversation was heading. “Yes, Antonio.

“And yet you’ve never...?”

“No.”

“With a woman?”

“No...”

“Or a man?”

“No.”

“...Not even once?”

“No, gods dammit!”

“How do you *stand* it?” the spy breathed. “A man with such an important position as you *has* to relieve stress somehow!” He shifted in his hammock, turning to face our cabinmate. “What about you, Donny?”

“Huh? M-me?”

“A handsome, strapping young man like you must surely have-”

“Antonio!” I snapped. “Leave him alone.”

The Feroxi man sighed. “Alright, alright. But, you know, Robin, if you ever *do* need that kind of release, I know some talented women who’ll-”

“Leave it,” I warned him. “I’m not interested in any of your whores.”

Antonio made a sound that could’ve been either a scoff or a sigh. Then, he surprised me by saying, in a gentler voice, “My mother was one, you know.”

I didn’t respond.

“A whore,” he clarified. “Although she wouldn’t admit it. Certainly not to me. She was born into a dirt-poor family, so she eventually had to make her living selling herself. To anyone she could.”

“Gosh,” Donnel murmured. “They didn’t have nuthin’ like that back in the village.”

I spoke up. “I presume, then, that your father was...one of her customers?”

“Not quite,” he replied. “She was attacked while wandering the streets alone, one night. She couldn’t fend them off, but she was rescued by a passing stranger – a foreigner. He fought the brigands off, then carried the helpless woman back to her home. She was grateful for his help, and...well, one thing led to another.

“A few days later, the foreigner left and returned to his home country of Regna Ferox. Some time after that, my mother realised she was with child. In a few months, I was born, and she had another mouth to feed. As difficult as her living had been before, it only got worse once I had arrived. She frequently told me, from a young age, that I had ruined her life. I practically had to raise myself, out on the streets, since she was so unwilling to spend any time with me – the little dark-skinned freak that reminded her of the only man she’d ever actually cared about. One day, she was attacked again. And this time, there was no brave Feroxi man to save her. She was killed, and I was left alone.

“Eventually, I left the town I’d been born in. Too many bad memories, you understand? I was taken in by a wise, old man, after I tried to steal from his house. He caught me, and gave me an offer to work for him. I took it, and I spent most of my childhood in that man’s home. But, eventually, I left that place, too. I struck out on my own, and sooner or later, Basilio found me. The rest is history, I guess.”

The cabin became quiet once more, with only the steady creaking of the ship piercing through the silence.

Finally, after I felt that the pensive silence had gone on long enough, I asked, “Why did you tell us that story?”

Antonio grunted. “I dunno. Don’t get much of a chance to talk about myself, I suppose.” He paused, and when he spoke again, I could hear the smile in his voice. “But, now I’ve got *you* guys. My two greatest buddies in the whole wide world!”

“You mean it, Antonio?” Donnel said, with wonder.

“Of course he doesn’t *mean* it,” I grumbled. “Haven’t you learned by now that Antonio is never honest?”

“Is that any way to treat your friend, Robin?” Antonio said. “I’ll have you know that every word of the story I just told was entirely true.”

“Gosh, I never realised you had such a hard life,” Donnel said.

“Ah, it’s fine,” Antonio said dismissively. “But, now that I’ve said my piece, I’d like for you folk to tell me all about *your* lives. Come on, let me hear it!”

“Forget it,” I grunted, before rolling over and pulling my blankets up around my ears.

“Aw, don’t mind Robin,” the boy muttered apologetically. “He has trouble sleepin’.”

“Oh, really? Ah, who cares about him? So, tell me more about yourself, Donny.”

“Oh, uh, well, I grew up on a small lil’ farm in Ylisse. I reckon it used to belong to my great-uncle Bobby...or was it my great-uncle Christie? Actually, now that I think ‘bout it, I coulda been my great-uncle Concobhar...”

Before Donnel could properly begin his story, I had already drifted off to that twisted hellscape, filled with snapping jaws and gaping voids, that was the world of my nightmares.

I was beginning to fear that we would never reach Valm. It had been nearly three months since we set sail from Ferox, and the horizon had scarcely changed in all that time. I was practically going stir-crazy, being trapped on that wooden coffin, with nothing surrounding us but brine. So, when the scouts told me that we were less than a week away from landfall, I was relieved, despite the threat of war looming over all our heads.

But that final week onboard the Ylissean flagship nonetheless held many surprises for me. Not least of which was the evening I found Ricken alone on the forecastle deck. Most of those onboard had already turned in, in preparation for the usual early rise the next day. But the mage still lingered above deck, even as the moon rose and covered the sea with its pale light.

“Is everything alright?” I asked him, as I approached.

He jumped, spinning around to face me with a look of surprise.

“R-Robin!” Ricken choked. “I didn’t hear you come near.”

“I’ve probably been spending too much time with Gaius,” I admitted, before grinning and joining him in looking out over the ocean. “So, like I asked, is everything alright?”

“Er...actually...”

“Yes?”

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to get off my chest. It’s probably something you need to hear. I’ve been meaning to tell you for some time now.”

I glanced over at the mage, who hadn’t lifted his gaze from the water below.

“What is it?”

“There’s...been some developments. And...”

“And...?” I prompted, growing more worried by the second.

“Miriel...she’s...with child.”

I blinked. “Oh. Oh? Oh! Then...? Oh...”

I wasn’t quite certain how to react to this piece of news. With how Ricken and Miriel had been behaving behind closed doors, something like this was hardly unexpected. I decided to respond the traditional way.

“Congratulations,” I said.

“Y-yeah. Thanks...”

“You’re not happy?”

Finally, Ricken looked me in the eye. “I’m delighted. Honestly, I am. It’s just...I’m only eighteen. What if I’m not ready to be a father?”

“Chrom didn’t think he was ready to be a father when Lucina came along, remember? Back then,

he was only a few years older than you are now.”

“But Chrom’s always been so...mature,” Ricken said, prompting me to laugh.

“Maybe that’s how it seemed to *you*,” I muttered drily. “Believe me, you’re much more ‘mature’ than he was at your age.”

Ricken frowned. “You think so?”

“Definitely.” A small silence lingered between us, before I asked, “When did you realise Miriel was pregnant?”

“A few weeks ago, she started getting ill in the mornings. We thought it was because of the ship for a while, but Miriel’s been on ships before during her travels, and she’s never been affected by seasickness.”

“I see...”

“We went to see Lissa, and she told us that Miriel was carrying a child. She promised she wouldn’t tell anyone, but...what’s the point?” Ricken threw his hands up into the air. “We’re heading off to war, for gods’ sakes! There’s no way we can hide a pregnancy! We’ll be arriving in Valm soon – how will Miriel hold her own when she’s fighting for two? And what’ll happen once the baby’s born? What if we’re still fighting by then, which we probably will be? I don’t want my child to be born in a warzone!”

“Ricken,” I whispered. “Calm down. I understand that you’re worried. But none of us can be sure what the future will hold.”

“I know,” Ricken said morosely. “And that scares me. Doesn’t it scare you, too?”

I hesitated. “...Sometimes, yes. But you have to remember that you’re not alone. A lot of the others are all fighting for someone, too. Chrom and Sumia have the two girls, back in Ylissstol. Lon’qu and Lissa have Owain, Virion and Maribelle have Brady. Gaius and Panne have their triplets. And they’re not the only ones, either.”

“But those children are safe, back in Ylisse,” Ricken reminded me. “We have no choice but to take *our* child with us where we go.”

“We have some of the best clerics in Ylisse on our side,” I told him. “It’ll be a safe pregnancy, I promise.”

“But so much could go wrong, Robin!” Ricken sighed, leaning over the railing.

I placed a hand gently on his shoulder. “Well...maybe that’s what being a parent is like. Just because things *can* go wrong, doesn’t mean that they *will*.” I smiled. “I’m a tactician, after all. I know how it feels to worry about every possible problem.”

Ricken chuckled quietly. “I suppose you do.” Our eyes locked again. “Thanks, Robin. I think it’s about time we broke the news to the rest of the Shepherds, anyway.”

“Just remember that we’re all on your side. Yours and Miriel’s.”

“Yeah...” Ricken gave me a watery smile. “Thanks again.”

“No problem,” I replied. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of red hair. “I’ll talk to you again soon, Ricken.”

“Yeah, okay...”

I left the young mage standing alone on deck and crossed over to the other side of the ship, where a single pegasus knight stood, leaning slightly against the railing.

“Cordelia?”

She spun, her crimson hair fluttering in the breeze. “Oh, Robin! What brings you out here this late?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Nicely avoided.”

The pegasus knight sighed, a wistful sound that could scarcely be heard over the lapping of the waves against the hull.

“Just contemplating some things,” she eventually replied.

“I hope you’re not contemplating jumping overboard.”

Cordelia frowned. “Of course not.”

“Just a joke,” I reassured her.

“Albeit a dark one.”

“...So, uh, how’s things?” I moved forward, joining her at the railing, and looked out over the ocean. “I believe you’re still working under Phila’s command within the Pegasus Legion?”

She nodded. “That’s correct. When I’m not attending to my duties as a Shepherd, of course. With the way things have been going over the last few years, we’ve steadily regained our strength and numbers, and we’ve recovered almost entirely from the catastrophic losses we suffered during the outbreak of the last war.” Again, that sigh. “Just in time for *another* war. And I’m certain that this one will be just as violent as the one before, if not even *more* so.”

I turned my head to glance at her. “You shouldn’t be so pessimistic.”

I heard the voice tut. *“Hypocrite.”*

“After all, we have the entire collective strength of Regna Ferox joined with our own,” I reminded her. “And it’s not like the Shepherds alone aren’t a force to be reckoned with, either.”

I thought I saw a smile play upon the fair woman’s lips. “Maybe you’re right.” The smile was fleeting, however, and her face grew worrisome again almost immediately. “But, no matter the war, there are always casualties.”

I understood. “You don’t want to lose anyone else like you did before. That’s what’s keeping you up so late.” I was almost relieved. “For a moment, I was thinking you were still upset over Chr-” I held my tongue at the last second, cursing my mistake.

“Upset over what, Robin?”

“Ah, never mind,” I said hurriedly. “What I’m trying to say is that you shouldn’t worry about what you can’t control. There will be casualties in this war that will be beyond *anyone’s* control. Fate claims whomever it wills. But you can bet that all of us will do our utmost to save those

whose lives aren't fated for death. And I know that you will, too."

Slowly, the pegasus knight gave a nod. "You're right, Robin. I will trust in your wisdom."

I chuckled, shaking my head as I stepped away from the railing. "My wisdom's just as good as anyone else's, you know. I'm only one man, after all." I yawned, feeling my jaw crack with the strain. "Anyway, I'll be going now. Don't stay up too late."

She smiled at me. "I won't."

As I turned and walked away from Cordelia, I heard the voice in my head chime in.

"You really ought to take your own advice sometimes."

I sighed. *I'm really not in the mood for this.*

"Why worry about things you can't control? Believe me, when the time comes, you'll realise the irony of that statement."

I reached my cabin, sneaking inside in an attempt to not wake up the slumbering Donnel. Antonio's eyes were shut, and his chest was moving up and down with a steady rhythm, but I couldn't be certain that he was actually asleep.

"Ignoring me will only get you so far, you know."

I settled down into my hammock. *Stop bothering me. I'm going to sleep.*

The voice chuckled coldly. *"No you're not."*

I clenched my teeth, not bothering to respond. The voice was right, of course. Sleep *would* come, eventually. But it would bring with it the nightmares once again.

So I closed my eyes, and waited.

When dawn finally came, what seemed an age later, I wrenched my eyes back open again, and heaved myself up out of my hammock. There were duties to attend to, now that the fleet was drawing near to the Valmese continent at long last. Most of the morning thereafter was taken up by checking our stock, as well as receiving updates from other ships in the fleet regarding their own supplies. Finally, it seemed that everything was in order for our arrival in Valm.

But I couldn't fully relax just yet. I took to the forecastle deck and looked out over the seas. I wondered what exactly would await us in Valm. Would we be able to meet with any potential allies that were fighting back against the empire? Or had Walhart already crushed all resistance?

I barely heard Gaius approach. "Hey, Bubbles."

I froze, before turning around and chuckling good-naturedly. "I see you haven't grown out of that silly nickname you gave me."

He raised an eyebrow. "And I see *you* haven't grown out of that old cloak of yours."

I pulled my cloak in defensively to my chest, deciding to change the subject. "What are you doing over here?"

Gaius shrugged. "I dunno. Just...seemed like something I should do." He crept over to the railing, just above the prow, with an expression I wasn't used to seeing on his face. Was it melancholy?

"Something on your mind?"

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "You can tell?"

"You don't usually look so morose."

A wry smile tugged at one side of his mouth. "I guess not." He slumped forward against the railing, his head poking out over the edge.

He spoke. "I dunno if I've ever told you this before, Bubbles, but I've never really had much of a home. I never stayed too long in the one place, if you get me." He plucked a lollipop from his breast pocket and placed it in his mouth. "Growing up on the streets, I pretty much had to raise myself. So I never had a family, either. But now...I've got Panne. And Cotto, Lina, and Yarne. I left the kids back in Ylisse without even really thinking about how it would affect me. And now that we're heading off to war again..." He broke off, swirling the lollipop thoughtfully around in his mouth. "What I'm trying to say is...I guess I've never felt so far away from home."

I thought I could understand Gaius' plight. After all, Ylisse was my home, too. I cared for the little princesses as though they were part of my own family. No matter what the voice told me, Ylissol was where I felt like I belonged, at least in part.

"It's okay to feel like that," I told him. "All fathers care for their children."

The voice laughed.

"If I really cared for them," Gaius murmured, his words slurring slightly due to the lollipop, "would I have left them so easily?"

"But think of it this way: aren't they the reason you and Panne are here in the first place? You're fighting for them – so that they can have a future where they won't have to live with oppression. If the Conqueror takes Ylisse, there won't be anywhere that's safe for anyone."

Slowly, the corners of Gaius' lips curled upwards. "Maybe you're right. All I want is for my kids and Panne to live in a world where they don't have to be afraid."

I raised one eyebrow. "That, and a lifetime's supply of chocolate?"

The thief laughed. "You know me too well, Bubbles." He paused. "We're going to win this, for the kids. And for Ylisse."

I clapped a hand onto his shoulder. "I won't be able to do it without you."

Gaius smiled, but whatever he was about to say next was cut off by a shout from the crow's nest.

"Land, ho!"

The cry went up around the ship, and I instinctively turned to face the prow, searching the horizon. Sure enough, in between the hulls of two ships, I caught a glimpse of land for the first time in almost a season. There was a peninsula jutting out into the great ocean, beside which was a bay. If our navigators had been steering us right (and I very much trusted they had), that bay was home to Valm Harbour, one of the largest ports of its kind in the world.

Excitement building, I stepped away from the railing and turned back to the ship at large.

“Duty calls, Bubbles?”

I nodded. “I have preparations to make before we reach land. I need to find Chrom.”

If Walhart was as dangerous as they said he was, we wouldn’t be making landfall without some degree of resistance from his army. It was up to us to be ready for them.

Chapter 25

The harbour was massive. In fact, there would have been enough space for our entire fleet to dock, had there not been a few leftover Valmese frigates lurking in the bay. Even as we sailed into the harbour, we could see the masses of Valmese troops already arming themselves in anticipation of our arrival.

“Awfully quick to react, aren’t they?” Basilio muttered.

“They probably spotted us from the peninsula to the south,” I said. “They’ve known we were coming since this morning.”

All of the Shepherds had been armed, and we were all bracing ourselves for the inevitable battle that would break out once we reached the docks. The khans were right there beside us, along with Antonio and several other elite Feroxi soldiers who had climbed aboard the flagship after our battle on the high seas. I had gotten to know one or two of them over the course of our journey; they weren’t as stoic and serious as some of their Feroxi brethren, although none of them were ever quite as cavalier as Antonio.

“That still didn’t leave them much time to prepare,” Frederick noted. “It’s remarkable how fast they’ve shored their defences. Either the Valmese army is highly efficient, or...”

Phila finished the thought for him. “Or they’re afraid.”

I felt a smirk tug at my lips. “And why shouldn’t they be? The fact that we’re here means that we decimated their fleet, which I’m sure they’re fully aware of.”

I heard Flavia chuckle nastily. “Well, then, we wouldn’t want to ruin a good first impression, would we?” She drew her axe from its faithful resting spot behind her back. “Let’s give these bastards something to *really* fear!”

Our objective was simple: wipe the Valmese presence from the town. That way, our fleet would be able to safely dock. As things stood right then, only our flagship and a handful of other ships were docking; from my estimations, that would be all we needed to take the town.

We landed on a beach just outside the town, and a roar went up from the Shepherds as our gangplank was lowered and we charged onto the beach. The famous Valmese cavalry didn’t dare try to oppose us on uneven sands, and so our first clash was with the infantry. Our own mounted troops, such as Sully and Frederick, also lingered well behind their usual positions on our frontline. Myself and Chrom lead the charge, with Vaike, Donnel, Lon’qu, Panne, Gregor, and even Anna making up our frontlines. The Feroxi soldiers, too, had joined us in the battle, and were already proving to be just as capable as the khans had promised. Further behind us were our mages, along with the ‘archest of archers’ himself. Lissa and Maribelle, our healers, were sticking together for the time being, although they had their orders to separate once the fighting called for it. Our aerial fighters had taken off directly from the ship, and were on the lookout for any enemy archers. I could hear Cherche’s wyvern shrieking from above as the battle began in earnest.

Valmese troops began flooding the beach with cries of “For the Conqueror!” and “Long live Emperor Walhart!” One particular overzealous axe-wielder charged at Chrom. With a quick swing of Falchion, that soldier’s blood was the first to be spilled that day.

We swiftly cut our way through our foes and, before too long, we set foot on solid cobblestone. There, we had our first encounter with the Valmese cavalry in months, and they proved more of a

challenge than ever before. Chrom was focusing so hard on one particular knight that he failed to notice an enemy soldier approach him from behind. I shoved Chrom out of the way as fast as I could, receiving the brunt of the attack instead. The soldier's lance pierced my gut, but Chrom was fortunately able to cut him down before he could press his advantage. Just as the pain began to swell, I felt the warm, soothing light of a healing spell wash it all away. I turned to see Anna brandishing a staff, flashing me a grin.

"Thanks," I murmured in surprise, before adding, "That's not going to cost me, is it?"

Anna winked. "First time's a freebie." She stashed the staff back into her belt and withdrew her sword as she resumed the fight.

Once our forces had spread out into the town, things became a lot less cramped. Our previous battle had been confined to a ship, which left little space for combat. Now that we had been given more room to manoeuvre, the Shepherds could fully display their awesome strength. Even having been a member for as long as I had, I still couldn't help but marvel at their power. Any gap in our defences was immediately filled. Any potential threat was immediately neutralised. I spotted enemy mages lying in wait on top of some nearby buildings, so intent on casting their spells on us that they completely missed the pegasus knights bearing down on them. The mages were sent careening off the roof by the force of Sumia and Cordelia's blows, before they both flew back up into the air once again. Just then, I caught sight of an archer lying in wait on another roof, with their sights trained on the pegasi. I didn't even have to give the order before a blast of dark magic blasted the archer away out of sight, accompanied by a familiar chuckle somewhere behind me.

We beat the Valmese back, eventually coming into an open town square, where I quickly realised that we had been led into an ambush. Suddenly, each of the entrances to the square were filled with soldiers dressed in red and white, shouting their battle cry. Loud noises from behind us indicated that they had flanked us, too.

They advanced on us, surrounding us on all sides. Soon, we had been forced into the centre of the square, facing outwards, as the enemy closed in.

"We seem to have been ensnared," I heard Panne say, her voice distorted by her transformed state.

"Robin," Chrom muttered to me, "do you have a plan?"

I mused for a moment, sizing up our foes, and calculating the odds of our victory. "Mmmmm...I think I do. Well, maybe 'plan' is too strong of a word. But it *is* an idea."

I glanced around, searching quickly for Henry and Tharja. Luckily, the two Dark Mages were nearby. One was glaring frostily out at our foes, the other smiling as though he had just received his birthday present earlier than expected.

"Henry! Tharja!" I called to them. "It's time for the 'sandstorm'!"

Henry blinked. "Uhh, you mean the one with all the spinning in circles?"

Tharja rolled her eyes. "He means the *other* one, idiot."

"Ohhhh, right!" Henry beamed as realisation hit him. "I remember *that* one!"

With the Valmese drawing ever nearer, Henry and Tharja spread out until the three of us were spaced an equal distance apart, forming a circle within our ranks.

"Everyone, get ready," I called, trying to make my voice heard. "The moment I give the signal, we strike."

“Alright.” Chrom gave a single nod, his eyes never leaving the Valmese troops in front of him.

Slowly, I withdrew a knife from one of the pockets inside my cloak. It was sharp, and elegantly designed. It was one of Tharja’s favourites, but she had of course given it to me when I had asked her, especially after I had told her what I was planning.

While on board the ship, I had spent much time pondering new tactics in order to deal with the Valmese threat. Virion had given me ample warning that they were not to be underestimated, after all. It only made sense for me to take further precautions than ever before. In particular, I had discussed certain matters with the two Dark Mages. The information they had given me was intriguing, to say the least, and it wasn’t long before I began planning a way to introduce these new ideas into our battle strategies.

One such idea was about to go into effect. I rolled up my left sleeve, revealing an intricate design that had been recently etched onto my skin. The design consisted of a single, straight line, running lengthwise down my forearm, surrounded by swirling patterns. Carefully, I took the knife, bracing myself for what came next. I placed the point of the knife at one end of the line, just below the palm of my hand, and I slowly slid the knife down the line. I clenched my teeth to avoid voicing my pain as my blood spilled freely from the cut I was making. Before too long, it was over, and the knife had reached the other end of the line. Immediately, the spiralling patterns began to glow, and they began to rotate. In a matter of seconds, they were spinning too fast for my eyes to track. I stepped forward, towards the advancing Valmese, and thrust my hand outwards, catching a glimpse of Henry doing the same out of the corner of my eye. I felt a surge that was both familiar and yet oddly alien, which travelled down my arm and burst from my outstretched hand as a burst of dark energy. The darkness swelled and expanded before my eyes, forming a cloud of blackness that melded with the ones Henry and Tharja had created. The cloud swirled around us, as though forming a barrier between the Shepherds and the Valmese army. But the spell had taken a lot out of me, and I fought against the blurry fog that crept at the edge of my vision.

“Now!” I shouted, and there was an answering cry from the Shepherds as we charged forwards into the blackness. As expected, once we had entered the dark cloud, our vision was scarcely impaired at all. The Valmese troops, however, were turning their heads this way and that, frantically searching for their enemies. They had been all but blinded by the ‘sandstorm’ that we had created, and were practically helpless to defend themselves from our attacks. They raised their shields in an effort to fend off our strikes, but it was all in vain. Soon, the square was littered with the dead and dying, and few if any of our troops had been injured. All the while, I could hear Henry’s cackling as we fought.

The storm didn’t last long, and soon the square was clear as day once again. A few Valmese soldiers remained, still trying their utmost to fight back.

I caught sight of Kellam, who was standing closer to Tharja than I knew she was comfortable with. He was glaring defiantly out at anyone who would draw near, while the dark mage was regarding the armoured man with a cold look.

“Must you stand so close to me, quiet man?” she said with a sigh. “I can handle myself.”

Kellam chose not to respond, instead deciding to fling his shield out in front of Tharja’s head. A spear ricocheted off of the smooth steel surface, clattering away across the cobblestone pavement below. Tharja was stunned, and so it fell upon Kellam to take down the approaching soldier with a single thrust of his lance through their abdomen.

The knight turned back to face her. “Are you alright, Tharja?”

She blinked, before fixing him with a curious stare. "I am. Thanks...Kellam."

Kellam let himself have a relieved smile, before he turned back to the battle at hand.

By then, the Valmese presence in the square had all but disappeared. Refusing to surrender to those who defied their emperor's will, they were all swiftly cut down.

Noticing how some of our comrades were beginning to relax now that the skirmish in the square had ended, Chrom told them, "Don't let your guards down just yet. I doubt the Valmese have put all their eggs in one basket; there will be others lurking around the place." He turned to me. "Robin, what should we do?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but hesitated when I caught the look Chrom was giving me. He'd seen me using that spell alongside Henry and Tharja: he knew I had used dark magic. I realised that that had taken him by surprise.

"Give me a moment," I answered him, before raising my fingers to my mouth and giving a sharp whistle.

As always, Minerva's hearing trumped her rider's, and the wyvern came swooping down out of the sky in a matter of seconds.

"What is it, Robin?" Cherche asked.

"Where are the gates that lead out of town?" I asked her.

"Well, there are three gates overall; one to the south, another to the west, and the last is to the northwest. The western gate is the largest – it seems to connect directly to the highroad. Indeed, the Valmese appear to be concentrating their forces there."

"Then Chrom, you take a team of fighters to the western gate. Cherche, if you can contact Sumia, tell her to follow that group. Khan Flavia?"

"Yes, Robin?"

"I want you to lead a team to the southern gate. Then Khan Basilio and I will take the gate to the northwest. Cherche, then you can follow us, and tell Cordelia to follow the team heading for the south gate."

"That sounds good to me," Chrom said, all trace of his misgivings having vanished from his expression. "Who should be in which group?"

I thought for a moment. "I think each group should have one healer. Lissa can go with Chrom, Maribelle can go with Flavia and I'll bring along Anna."

"Sorry to interrupt," Cherche said, with an apologetic bow of her head, "but there is one more thing you should know. While I was scouting, I noticed a woman being chased down by the Valmese. They seemed rather intent on not letting her escape."

Chrom and I digested this piece of information.

"Any enemy of theirs is a friend of ours," he decided. "Where was this woman last seen?"

"In the northern region of the city, sire."

"Then I'll keep an eye out for her," I said. "Once we've taken the gates, the town will fall in no

time. If we don't find her before then, we can search for her."

Chrom nodded, although a frown creased his forehead. "I just hope the Valmese don't get to her first."

Once the groups had been assigned, we all went our separate ways. Myself and the West Khan made our way northwards, following the streets that would lead us to the gate. With us were seven others – Gaius, Panne, Henry, Gregor, Anna, one of the Feroxi soldiers, and Olivia, of all people. I had voiced my confusion as to the meek dancer's participation in the battle before we had set off from the square.

"Olivia? I thought you were staying on the ship?"

She had assumed what she must have thought was a haughty expression. I, however, thought it was rather adorable.

"I can fight, too!" she had insisted, brandishing a thin longsword. "I'm tired of lingering behind during battles."

"But we need you to help out in the infirmary."

"Lissa and Maribelle work in the infirmary even more than I do!" she had protested hotly. "They fight alongside you, so why shouldn't I?"

Basilio had laughed in his typically loud manner. "She's got fire in her! A real Feroxi woman, if I ever saw one!"

Olivia had blushed and squirmed. "Oh! It's nothing like that! I just wanted to help out a bit more, that's all."

But the khan beamed down at the girl. "Prettier than a rose, with twice as many thorns! You make this old man prouder than anything, Olivia! The man who'll take you as his bride will have to be made of stern stuff, I reckon."

The dancer had cringed deeply, prompting me to say, "If you say you can fight, I believe you. I don't think Basilio will let me keep breathing if you got killed under my command," I added quietly to her.

"That's if the embarrassment doesn't kill me first," she had muttered back.

"Nya ha ha! It's good to have you along, Olivia!"

"Y-yeah, likewise," she had mumbled shamefacedly.

We made our way down the narrowing streets, following the general directions Cherche had given us. That was easier said than done, mind; it seemed that the town had been poorly planned after it had sprung up around the harbour. Buildings had been built almost haphazardly close to one another, turning ordinary streets into little more than alleyways. One upside of the town's design, though, was that sounds could travel quickly via echoing along the stone walls. As such, we were able to hear the sounds of fighting nearby.

"Sounds like trouble, Bubbles," Gaius muttered to me, pulling out his sword.

Panne's nose twitched. "I can smell someone close by. They're coming this way, and they're being followed by men in suits of armour."

Almost immediately, there was a sound of footsteps on stone, and a slender woman sprinted out of an alleyway entrance just ahead of us. She was clad in furs and a robe, and her long, black hair was kept out of her eyes by a white headband. She was breathing heavily, having obviously run at speed for some distance. The woman looked up and down the street, spotting us and narrowing her eyes, before pausing as she took in our unfamiliar appearance.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Are you allies of Walhart?"

Basilio spat. "Not likely."

Her stance relaxed ever so slightly. "Then we have a foe in common." She regarded us quietly for a moment, before saying, "Are you, perhaps, the Ylissean League that crossed the oceans to wage war against the Conqueror?"

"That's right," I told her. "You're in danger, aren't you? Why are Walhart's forces trying to kill you?"

The woman was about to answer, but there was a sudden cry of "There she is!" from the alleyway she had appeared out of.

Another voice cried, "Don't let her get away!"

"Fie!" the woman hissed. "These Valmese dogs are persistent!"

"Get behind us," I ordered her. "Leave them to us."

She quickly obeyed, sprinting over to join us just as the soldiers arrived on the scene. Before the two troops had a chance to react, Henry and I had cast some Elfire spells and taken them out. I shook off the wave of dizziness that followed my casting, before turning back to the newcomer.

"You have my most sincere gratitude," the woman said, drawing herself up to her fullest height before bowing. "Perhaps you might give me the honour of knowing your names, sirs?"

"I am Robin, Royal Tactician of the Ylissean League and retainer to His Grace, Exalt Chrom."

"And I am Khan Basilio of Regna Ferox."

The woman's eyes widened. "The Khan Regnant? I am most honoured to—"

Basilio grunted. "No, just the *West* Khan. My counterpart in East Ferox still holds that particular title. For another year, at least. Now, does a beautiful woman like you have a name?"

She bristled. "Ah, my apologies. I should have introduced myself. I am Say'ri, Princess of Chon'sin and a member of the Resistance."

"So there *is* an organised resistance movement within the empire?" I asked her.

"Aye, of sorts," she replied. "Several groups have formed to seek liberty for the states of Valm."

"Then it looks like we're on the same side," Basilio said. "We're trying to take down this Walhart because he has his eyes on *our* continent."

"Aye, I had heard of the Conqueror's designs." Say'ri's eyes flared. "His arrogance and

irreverence know no bounds. That is why I must speak with the exalt and the Khan Regnant. I wish to join our steel with yours.”

“We’ll take you to them,” I promised. “But first, we need to ensure that the Valmese grip on this city is loosened. Will you fight with us?”

Say’ri held out her hands. “I would, Sir Tactician. But I am afraid I lack a weapon. Skilled though we Chon’sin warriors may be, a swordmaster fights poorly without a sword.”

“Then take mine,” I said, offering the handle of my blade to her. “I fight just as well with a tome, anyway.”

“Truly? I am in your debt once again, Sir Robin.”

I waved a hand dismissively. “Think nothing of it. So, Lady Say’ri, do you know this city well?”

“Indeed, sir. As well as the back of my hand.”

“Then we could use your help,” Basilio said gruffly. “Getting around this place is a damn nuisance. May as well be trying to find a maiden in a brothel.”

“Is difficult, Gregor finds.”

“I do not understand this term,” Panne muttered, with a frown on her face. “Is this another aspect of human behaviour I am unfamiliar with?”

Gaius winced. “You’re probably better off not knowing.”

“As I was saying,” I said in a loud voice, “we would appreciate it if you would lead us to the northwestern gate, Lady Say’ri.”

“Of course. Follow me, my new friends.”

The princess led the way down a series of streets and alleyways. Any Valmese we ran into patrolling the city were quickly dispatched. It was my first glimpse of the Chon’sin woman in combat, and it was clear that she was no beginner; her skill with a blade, even one she was somewhat unfamiliar with, was impressive. Her form was elegant and skilled, and few of the conscripted Valmese soldiers we faced ever stood a chance. It was peculiar, though, how much her style of swordplay reminded me of someone. Someone I knew...

With Say’ri’s guidance, we found the gate to the northwest of the city. It would have been large enough for a carriage or wagon of significant size to pass through, had it been open. As it was, it was barred by a group of enemy soldiers who were keen to fend off the invaders.

The skirmish that followed was the first time I ever saw Olivia in battle, and she didn’t disappoint. While she was far from strong, her fighting style was unique; she seemed to be incorporating some of her dance moves into her strikes, which made for an unpredictable and interesting form of combat. The most peculiar thing was, when I saw Olivia twirling and dancing away from her opponent’s blows, it sparked something within me. I felt invigorated to fight even harder. And I noticed that Olivia was similarly affecting my comrades, as well. I just hoped that it wouldn’t distract them from the battle at hand.

Once all of the Valmese guards had been finished off, Gaius, Panne and Gregor volunteered to stay at the gate until reinforcements arrived from the fleet, while the rest of us escorted the Chon’sin princess to see Chrom. Say’ri knew the way to the western gate, and so it was really *her* who took the lead. Soon enough, we came across the great gate – which was almost twice the

size of its northern cousin – along with the group of Shepherds and Feroxi that had been sent there. The bodies of the Valmese soldiers that had defended the gate to their last breath were scattered here and there, dripping blood onto the paved ground. We found Chrom firing off orders, sending messengers and fighters back across the city to the port. I called to him, and he noticed our arrival.

“Robin,” he greeted me with a nod, “I take it that the northwestern gate has been secured?”

“That’s right. We also found the woman that the Valmese were hunting.” I stepped back and gestured to Say’ri, allowing her to introduce herself, ignoring another dizzy spell.

“Chon’sin, you say?” Chrom scratched his chin. “I’m afraid I’m unfamiliar with that particular kingdom.”

“It lies far to the south of here, in a distant region of the continent. It was once a proud and mighty kingdom, whose culture was respected across the land.” Her delicate face grew dark. “That is, until Walhart invaded and forcibly removed my brother from his rightful place on the throne. We were able to escape, along with some of our loyal retainers. Unfortunately, many of our faithful comrades were lost in the battle.” She bowed her head, as though in prayer.

Chrom dismissed the Shepherds, save for me, with a wave of his hand. Once myself and Basilio were left alone with the exalt and the princess, Chrom asked, “This brother of yours – the king of Chon’sin – is he also allied with the Resistance?”

Say’ri raised one eyebrow in an expression of amusement. “‘Allied’? Fie, he *is* the Resistance! There are few men in the whole of Valm more feared or respected than Yen’fay. He is the driving force behind this rebellion.”

“Where is Yen’fay now?” I questioned her.

“He is seeking allies,” she explained. “Wherever they can be found. Although the Conqueror’s forces may be great in number, many of them lack discipline and proper training; Walhart owes the bulk of his army to conscription policies. On the other hand, our allies are skilled and powerful. United, we could pose a veritable threat the Conqueror’s reign. And so, for some time, my brother and I have struggled to bring us together.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“Greed. Jealousy. Sloth.” Say’ri spat the words with contempt. “All the old weaknesses of man. The dynasts all would have freedom, but on their own terms. Some refuse to take up arms unless their territory is threatened. Others thrive under the Conqueror’s heel and will not join unless there is profit in it.” She paused. “Furthermore, many of our former allies in the southern regions and elsewhere lost faith in Yen’fay when he was defeated in battle by one of Walhart’s loyalists – a swordsman without peer, so they say. Liberty is a fine word, aye, but not always enough to rouse men from foolishness.”

Basilio grunted. “Then I guess you’re looking for a more convincing argument?”

A smile played on the princess’ lips. “Just so, Khan Basilio. And yet, Walhart is said to command a million men now. Perhaps more. Sooner or later he will stamp out the Resistance entirely, if we do not unite.”

My stomach lurched as I took in Say’ri’s words. I noticed Chrom’s expression shift to mirror my own. Even if these rumours turned out to be false, the odds were still stacked heavily against us.

Say’ri must have noticed the wariness in our eyes, for she barked a sudden laugh. “Ha! And what

are one million men against the Ylislean dogs of war? Against the fearless warriors of Ferox? You stopped a thousand of their ships, did you not? Your daring strategy has awoken and inspired people across all of Valm. Together I know we can yet unite the Resistance and break Walhart's grip! Help us, Prince Chrom! I beg of you!"

Chrom was silent for a moment as he weighed his options.

"I would speak with Yen'fay," he said eventually. "I apologise for my indecision, Princess Say'ri, and yet I must consider the needs of the halidom before all else."

"And we haven't yet heard from the Khan Regnant regarding this matter." I pointed out.

"I'll discuss this with Flavia personally," Basilio vowed.

"I understand," Say'ri said, "and I am also grateful. I shall make contact with Yen'fay at once. For now, it would be best if we leave this town posthaste."

Basilio blinked in surprise. "You want us to just pack up and leave? I don't mind saying we achieved a damn good victory here. Won't running off now only make today's battle pointless?"

"Walhart shows little mercy to those who oppose his reign," Say'ri told him. "Once word reaches his ear of today's battle, he will send as many of his forces as he can muster to wipe us out. I have told you once before that your actions thus far have lit a fire that will spread across the continent. Should we linger here, that fire will be quenched long before the inferno of rebellion can erupt."

"Then we'll need to work quickly to have all of our ships unloaded," I said, already internally debating the most efficient way to do so.

Say'ri nodded. "I shall have my men assist you, Sir Robin." She turned back to Chrom and the khan. "Once I receive word of Yen'fay's whereabouts, I shall inform you immediately. My brother will be able to take us to a secure location, where we may discuss freely the matter of this war."

"That's a sound plan," Chrom said. "Robin, the troops will need your help in organising the movement of cargo and the like."

"Alright," I said, making to leave for the docks, "I'll go and-"

There was another wave of dizziness, stronger than any of the ones before, and suddenly my legs had given way and I was lying with my face pressed against the cobblestones.

Chrom was calling my name. "Robin? Robin!"

I lifted a heavy hand and swatted him away. "I'm...fine," I heard myself slur.

But a pair of strong arms had already lifted me up off the ground. Chrom was saying something, but it was difficult to hear exactly what. The words "ill" and "infirmary" leaped out at me, prompting me to groan a faint protest.

"Take it easy, Robin," a soft voice I recognised as Stahl's whispered into my ear. "We'll get one of the healers to take a look at you..."

Anything else the cavalier said was lost as I succumbed to the numbness inside my head and passed out.

When I came to, I was looking up at a familiar, white canvas ceiling and lying in a soft, warm bed. My head was pounding, although the worst of the pain was coming from my left forearm. I tried to blink myself back into full consciousness, eventually lifting my aching head to examine my arm. I was still wearing my cloak, and so I rolled back the sleeve to reveal the symbol emblazoned on my bare skin. It had stopped glowing long ago, but the wound I had made still looked fresh.

While I was still studying my arm, a voice cried out to me.

“Ah, Robin, I see you’re awake now.”

I glanced up to see Lissa standing at the foot of my bed, her arms folded, and her forehead lined with worry.

I tried a smile. “You don’t have to look so concerned.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Is that so? Then tell me, Robin, why you have a knife wound on your arm that I can’t heal?”

My smile turned into a grimace. “Uh...well...”

The princess of Ylisse tutted and strode over to my bedside, sitting down on the left side of the bed.

“Show me your arm,” she ordered, although her voice had taken on a gentler tone.

Reluctantly, I rolled up my sleeve and displayed both the symbol and the injury there. Lissa gasped quietly when she laid eyes on my bare arm.

“Robin, did you...?” Lissa met my gaze, and there was a strange look in her eye. A look of hurt and confusion. “I...I think you should stay here for another while longer.”

“But-”

“I don’t want to hear it!” she cut me off grumpily. “Chrom and the others have already gotten to work in unloading the ships. They can manage fine without you, at least for today. For now, you need to rest until your dizziness goes away.”

And with that, she left me to attend to the other wounded soldiers. I cursed my own incompetence – Henry had warned me that using dark magic had various side-effects, especially for first-time casters. It was my own fault that I had ended up in this situation.

However, I didn’t regret what I had done. It had been a hugely effective tactic against the Valmese, and I was looking forward to utilising the benefits of dark magic in battle again. Unfortunately, I was without access to my books and scrolls for the time being.

All I could do was wait.

Chapter 26

The next day, we were on the road leading west out of Valm Harbour. According to Say'ri's informants, the closest Valmese legion was located due south of the city, meaning that they would be soon approaching from that direction. Fortunately, with some help from the Resistance, we were quickly able to get our supply convoy moving, and we were soon leaving the sea far behind us. Frederick had concerns about leaving our ships in the bay, but I reminded him that the Valmese would likely be expecting us to return to Valm Harbour. They would keep our ships intact as bait. Or so I hoped, at least, although I didn't voice my doubts to the great knight.

Yen'fay had agreed to meet with us at a point along the highroad, and so we were staying as close to it as we could. Of course, that only made our journey shorter and easier, so I couldn't complain. Any Valmese garrisons stationed along the road had no chance against our might. We were safe, for the time being.

Meanwhile, I was spending my time poring over various maps and whatever information I could find on Valmese army movements I could find. Say'ri and the Resistance were enormously helpful in that regard, supplying me with enough data to begin planning our strategy for the war. Even though Chrom and Flavia had yet to speak with Yen'fay, I couldn't imagine that they would refuse to aid his war effort – not after coming so far. And it was still safer to prepare for the worst, regardless.

And so, several mornings after our departure from Valm Harbour, I was sitting at my desk in my tent, studying a set of maps. I heard the flap of the entrance to my tent open, and I turned around in my seat to see who had just come in. It was Chrom, sporting an anxious frown.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning, Chrom. Shouldn't you be busy?" I half-accused him. "The war's beginning, and it falls on you to lead the troops."

"You're one of my 'troops' as well, Robin," he reminded me gently, although the frown never eased. "I'm never too busy to make time for one of my men, especially when it's a serious matter like this."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow, although I knew well what Chrom was talking about.

He looked around the tent interior for a seat and, finding no empty chair, sat down on my bed. "It's about what happened back in Valm Harbour. During the battle...I saw you using dark magic. At first, I thought nothing of it – I know how keen you are to experiment with magic of all kinds. But, just yesterday, Lissa told me that you had injured yourself, and she was unable to fully heal it. She said there was some sort of strange interference preventing her magic from working properly. Apparently, she encountered this sort of problem regularly with Tharja and Henry...but never with you. And after she examined the wound, she seemed to think it was...well, self-inflicted."

I turned my chair around to face the exalt. "And you believe it has something to do with the dark magic I cast?"

"Doesn't it?"

I sighed and reluctantly rolled up my sleeve, displaying the symbol etched into my wrist, along with the wound in question.

Chrom's frown deepened. "What is...?"

"Dark magic isn't just about tomes," I explained to him. "There are hexes and curses, too, and they all require some kind of sacrifice. The more powerful the hex, the greater the sacrifice needed."

"And it's got to be...blood?" he whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from the line carved into my flesh.

"Not always. Different hexes require different reagents and ingredients. Since we were at sea for so long, we weren't able to obtain certain materials on such short notice. But don't worry – now that we're back on dry land, Anna will be able to make contact with her suppliers. From now on, I can use reagents instead of having to-

"No, Robin." Chrom finally looked up, and fixed me with a glare. "I don't want you practising any more dark magic. You're our tactician. We can't afford for you to keep doing this sort of thing to yourself."

I frowned. "But...but I *just* said..."

Chrom wasn't haven't any of it. "'But' nothing."

"Henry and Tharja use dark magic all the time," I pointed out. "You never seem to let *that* bother you."

Chrom gritted his teeth. "That's because those two are...they're..."

"Plegians?" I finished for him.

He didn't meet my eye. "I was going to say 'experts'. They've had plenty of experience with this sort of thing before. This is the first I've even *heard* of you meddling with dark magic."

"But you saw how effective that spell was against the Valmese! If dark magic can give us the edge in battle, why *shouldn't* I use it?"

"I *saw* you!" Chrom snapped. "After the battle was over, you looked so pale and worn. You fainted before you could be brought to the infirmary!"

"Maybe I was just tired?" I shot back. "Overworked, even?"

"I've seen you 'overworked' before, Robin," Chrom said, his voice sharp as his blade, "and this was different entirely. If that's the kind of toll this dark magic takes on you, then I don't want you to have anything to do with it! You're our tactician, for gods' sakes! We can't afford to have you kill yourself trying to use some blasted Plegian spell!"

His voice had been rising dangerously throughout the discussion, and it threatened now to erupt into a shout. Chrom noticed, and quickly reined in his anger.

"Gods, Robin," the exalt said, his voice pained, "can't you just see that I'm worried about you? Even if you *weren't* in charge of this entire army, you're still my friend. My comrade, my brother-in-arms, and a whole lot more besides. You're my firstborn child's *godfather*, dammit; you're like family to me. I don't want to see you get hurt."

The sheer tenderness in Chrom's words touched me in a way I didn't think anything could anymore. I thought the years of nightmares and doubts had built up enough walls to mean that my heart could never be breached ever again. But it seemed that I was wrong.

“I...I’m sorry, Chrom.” I lowered my head into my hands and exhaled deeply. “You’re right. Even if I was practising dark magic, I should have given you some kind of warning. It won’t happen again.”

He seemed to relax. “Good. I’m...grateful, Robin. I know these last few weeks, months – hell, even *years* – have been unkind to you in some ways. But there are still people who care about you. We’ll always be here for you when you need us most.”

Unable to speak, I simply nodded. Chrom smiled, and finally stood up from the bed.

“Well, you were right about one thing,” he said, chortling slightly. “I *am* pretty busy. I’d better get back to it. I’ll see you later, Robin.”

“Yeah. Later.”

He left the tent, closing the flap behind him, leaving me alone with my thoughts once again.

“Oh, how sentimental. Chrom obviously cares for you deeply. How easily his trust in you would crumble if he knew how you’ve betrayed him.”

I haven’t betrayed him! I was...coerced into acting against him by an evil man with plans for destruction on a grand scale. If Chrom knew, I’m sure he’d understand!

“Then why haven’t you told him?” the voice asked, with the weariness of someone who has asked a question dozens of times and still received no satisfactory answer.

I turned back to face my desk in anger. *You already know why.*

“You say you grow tired of me repeating myself. It seems to me like you’re the one who’s being repetitive.”

I chose not to answer. The voice was right, of course, and it knew it.

“However, I do believe that you were correct in using dark magic in battle, if that makes you feel any better,” the voice added.

I spoke quietly, hoping my neighbours in their tents wouldn’t hear me talking to myself. “You know, funnily enough, it *doesn’t*.”

“You felt that power, too, didn’t you? Coursing through your veins. I know you enjoyed it.”

“All the more reason for me to avoid using it. That level of power is clearly addictive. And besides, I promised Chrom.”

“Chrom doesn’t know what you know. He’s short-sighted, blinded by his prejudice towards Plegia and their ways. You noticed it, too – he still hasn’t gotten past his hatred.”

“Can you blame him? They’re responsible for the murder of his sister. Gangrel all but told him as much.”

“All I’m saying is that that Chrom doesn’t have to know about it. After all, you’re already hiding so much from him; in the grand scheme of things, what’s another few secrets to keep?”

I growled. “I don’t like what you’re saying.

“Do you ever?”

I decided not to reply. There was still work to be done, plans to be made. I couldn't afford to waste time arguing with myself.

Later that afternoon, once I had finally left my tent, I decided to find Lon'qu in order to spar. The Feroxi warrior had given me lessons during the previous war, which had served me well over the years. But a refresher course was in order; I had been neglecting my training recently, even though I desperately needed to get back into shape after years of staying in the palace in Ylissol.

I found Lon'qu practising his forms alone, in the middle of a clearing near the edge of camp. I noticed almost immediately that something was wrong: there seemed to be less power in the myrmidon's movements, less fluidity and strength. I approached quietly, not intending to disturb him, but he noticed me all the same and dropped his sword.

"What is it?"

Although not even years of married life with Lissa had entirely softened his gruff exterior, Lon'qu had still come a long way from the emotionless man I had met for the first time in Arena Ferox so long ago. He seldom laughed, but he at least had begun smiling more often. No longer did he refuse to leave his quarters during times of celebration. And, from what I had experienced in the palace, he truly cared for his wife and infant son. It was heartwarming, in a way, to see how much he had changed.

So I smiled when he greeted me. "Hello, Lon'qu. How's the training coming along?"

"Same as ever," he replied, although his sword remained lowered. "I didn't grow complacent during my time in the palace, unlike *someone* I could mention." The corners of his eyes had crinkled, and there was even a trace of humour in his voice. "I presume that is what you have come to me for?"

I nodded, although the beginnings of a frown were lining my forehead. "Yes, but there's something else. I noticed your form has worsened ever so slightly. Even your training back in Ylissol was in better condition. Is there something on your mind?"

The myrmidon resumed his usual, frosty expression. "...Perhaps. But it won't interfere with my prowess in battle. I will overcome this hurdle myself."

There was an old tree stump nearby that I chose to sit down on. "Are you sure? You're not alone, you know. If there's a problem, you can talk about it."

Lon'qu clenched his jaw. "It's no concern of yours. I would prefer not to burden you with my own difficulties, Robin."

He lifted his sword, and resumed his training. As he moved from form to form, it struck me where I had seen them before. Although the methods were different, there could be no mistaking that Lon'qu style of swordsmanship was the same as that of Say'ri and her fellow Resistance members. And more than that, the resemblance was there in their facial structures; the narrower eyes in comparison to the Ylisseans and Plegians, the dark hair and the sharp features...

"Lon'qu," I began, studying the man quietly, "were you, by any chance, born in Chon'sin?"

He stiffened, before lowering his sword once again and turning to face me with a stern look.

“...”

I ploughed on. “Is that the reason why you’re acting differently? I’m sure it’s been a while since you were around other members of your own race. And the fact that you’re so close to home has likely had an effect on you.”

Lon’qu’s expression hardened. “Know this, Robin: I hold no allegiance towards my birthplace anymore. I left Chon’sin behind me long ago. Ylisse is my home now, and Regna Ferox before then. I am not the sort of man who would let such sentimentality get the better of me.”

I raised my hands in mock surrender, feeling guilty at having provoked the myrmidon. “Alright, sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up. And I believe what you say: I know you wouldn’t let this sort of thing dictate how you fight. But it’s important to still talk about this. Does Lissa know?”

Lon’qu’s expression softened. “Yes. I wouldn’t dare keep the secret of my origins from my own wife.”

As though on cue, we both heard Lissa’s voice calling out from close by.

“Honey? Where are you?”

We glanced over as the princess entered the clearing, wearing a smile that only widened as she saw her husband.

“Ah, *there* you are! How is my favourite husband?”

Lon’qu wore a smile that all but lit up his face. “‘Favourite’? I thought I was your *only* husband?”

She walked over to him, wrapping her arms around him and taking him into her embrace.

“You’re both, silly,” she said, with a giggle. With her head pressed against his chest, she finally took notice of me.

“Robin!” Lissa cried, letting go of her spouse. “I’ve barely seen you since you got out of the infirmary! Have there been any more problems since?”

I shook my head. Truthfully, the wound on my arm had finally closed and was beginning to heal, although it still hurt quite badly.

“No, but I wanted to thank you for helping.”

Lissa smiled modestly, waving my gratitude away. “That’s what I’m here for!” She studied my face intensely. “But you’ve been inside that tent so much lately. I think you’ve gotten even paler than Henry! Have you been eating properly?”

I was about to reassure her, but my stomach gave my hunger away with a growl.

Lissa had heard, and her face took on an unimpressed expression. “Food,” she ordered flatly. “Now. I don’t want to hear any complaints.”

Knowing better than to argue with the stubborn princess, I begrudgingly took my leave. Just as I was about to leave the clearing, I heard Lon’qu call out my name.

“Robin, come find me after your meal. We still need to resume your training.”

Although my back was turned, I could still hear the smile in his voice. “Thanks.”

I left the royal couple behind, and made my way to the mess tent. In truth, I hadn't realised just how hungry I really was. My gut growled again, aching deeply. I was worried that word would get out that I had been skipping meals – Chrom would never let me hear the end of it if he found out. In fact, if I collapsed due to hunger, the exalt would probably murder me himself!

I had been lingering in the tub for quite some time, trying to will the heat of the water to soothe the pain from my aching muscles. After eating my fill at the mess tent, I had taken Lon'qu up on his offer and sparred with him. It had been so long since our last session that I had forgotten just how ruthless of a mentor the myrmidon was. My body was covered with bruises and grazes inflicted by wooden training swords. Lon'qu himself had joined me in the bathing tent once the 'lesson' had ended, but he had left a short while after; he wasn't a man for long conversations or soothing baths.

One-by-one, the other Shepherds using the baths also left, meaning I was alone in the tent. For a time, at least. The water in the tub had just turned lukewarm when I heard the flap of the tent open and looked up, only to choke when I saw who had entered.

"Panne?!"

"Do not look so stunned, man-spawn."

"B-but y-you...!" I stammered. "You can't *be* here!"

The taguel woman sat down on the floor some distance in front of my tub, and tilted her head in confusion. "Why not? I have been in this place plenty of times before without complaint."

I squeezed my eyes shut, sinking down into the tub to conserve my modesty. "*Because*, Panne, this is the men's time for using the baths! You can come back in an hour's time, I promise, just-!"

But Panne stayed where she was. In fact, she seemed amused by my exasperation. "I do not see the problem, man-spawn. Why do you humans hold such strong beliefs on the differences between the sexes? In taguel society, all are equal."

"That's not the point!" I hissed, before trying to gather myself. "In our society, it's seen as inappropriate for men and women to be...*disrobed* in each others' presence. That experience tends to be shared between lovers or close friends."

"I do not understand the rituals of intimacy amongst humans." Panne shook her head, sending her ears swinging from side-to-side. "After all, the act of copulation in itself is not so different between taguels as it is humans."

I groaned. Even marriage to a human had apparently not entirely familiarised Panne to the intricacies of their society.

"I don't want to have this conversation with you, Panne," I said, as patiently as I could manage. "In fact, I would *really* prefer if you left."

But the taguel refused to move from her spot. "I wish to speak with you, man-spawn."

"And you're *sure* Gaius wouldn't be better suited to talk to you about this sort of thing?" I asked hopefully.

“You misunderstand. I do not wish to speak to you about the bizarre attitudes of mankind, Robin.”

I blinked. That was the first time she had addressed me by my name. Slowly, I sat up in the tub, facing the taguel woman directly.

“Alright. What is it?”

“It is a simple matter,” she said. “I believe I am with child once again.”

“...Oh.” *Not such a simple matter after all!*

“I thought that I should inform you, the tactician,” Panne explained. “Although the pregnancy has only just begun, I thought you might have concerns about my participation in battles.”

Miriel’s pregnancy had progressed since our arrival in Valm, although she was still perfectly capable of fighting. I didn’t see any reason why Panne would fare any differently, provided she took care when fighting.

“I think, for the time being, you should carry on as normal,” I told her. “But take caution. If you ever feel ill or weaker than usual, for any reason, I want you to inform a healer immediately.”

Panne nodded. “I understand. I appreciate your help and concern, Robin.”

Starting to relax for the first time since Panne had entered the tent, I asked, “How does Gaius feel about this piece of news?”

“He is quite pleased,” she said with a smile. “Gaius has proven himself to be a capable and caring parent. I am blessed to have him as my mate.”

I chuckled. “I’m sure it can’t be easy raising three kits. How does he fare when compared to other taguel parents?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

I winced. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t realise you were so young when you lost your family.”

“You are forgiven. I have a new family, now. And with them, I shall start a new warren.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her words. “I think the future of the taguel is in safe hands.”

Panne smiled right back. “I believe you are right.”

The quiet moment we shared in the tent was interrupted all too quickly when Vaike barged in through the flap. He was already naked, save for a towel wrapped around his waist. He took a quick look around the tent’s interior, before spotting me and missing Panne entirely.

“Heya, Robin!” the blond man enthused as he loosened the towel and slung it over his shoulder. “Long day, huh? When do ya think those guys in the Resistance are going to show up? Feels like we’ve been waitin’ here for *ages!*”

I was too embarrassed to reply, which only gave Panne time to announce her presence.

“You should learn some patience, man-spawn.”

Vaike let out a scream so loud that I’m sure it could have been heard all over camp.

“You should also learn about basic observation,” she continued. “After all, this is the second time

this very thing has happened.”

I sank into the bath, only to realise that the water had finally gone cold. I sighed.

A team of scouts entered the camp later that evening, bringing word of Yen’fay’s imminent arrival. I was expecting a procession of cavaliers to ride through, bearing the sigils of dynasts from all around the continent. Instead, the arrival of the Resistance was a rather subdued affair. A score of men and women, all clad in green hue, marched into the camp as the sun set. They were escorted to the meeting area, in a tent next to Chrom’s, where the exalt, Say’ri and the two khans were already waiting. Also seated at the meeting table were Frederick, Cherche and Virion, who looked ever so slightly uncomfortable as the Resistance members were led in. I took my seat beside Chrom, silently taking in the appearances of the dynasts.

It struck me, then, just how diverse the people of Valm really were; almost every person to take a seat before me was of a different race or realm to his or her neighbour. And yet, Walhart had succeeded in bringing the entire continent under his heel. That feat alone impressed me, even though I did not agree with the Conqueror’s means.

The last person to enter was a tall man with silver hair and proud, serious features. His robes were clearly of Chon’sin origin, as were the entourage of warriors who had entered before him. His every step – though graceful – carried with it the hint of strength, and was filled with purpose. There was no mistaking this man for royalty, even if he had not resembled Say’ri in the shape of his cheekbones and the jut of his jaw.

The princess stood up immediately as the silver-haired man entered. “Yen’fay! Brother, it is good to see you.”

The king of Chon’sin acknowledged his sister with an incline of his head. “Say’ri. It is good to see you, also.” The ghost of a smile played on his lips, before he turned to face us once again with a look of utter seriousness. “I am Yen’fay of Chon’sin. I am the son of Xen’shi – the nineteenth bearer of the crown of Chon’sin – and also the leader of the Chon’sin Liberation Army. Might I have the honour of knowing to whom I speak?”

Chrom stood first. “I am Chrom, the Exalt of Ylisse and Scion of the Hero-King, Marth. I head the Ylissean League.” He placed a hand on my shoulder, and did the same to Frederick. “These men are my advisors: Robin, my tactician, and Frederick, my retainer.”

The two khans were next.

“I am Flavia, Khan Regnant of Ferox. And this...man is Basilio, my counterpart in West Ferox.”

I suppressed a smile, knowing that the mighty khan had stopped just short of calling Basilio an ‘oaf’.

Virion stood, inhaling deeply as he began his introduction. “I am Virion, Duke of House Rosanne and heir to-”

One of the dynasts, a short, broad man with a bald head and a series of faded scars criss-crossing his face, growled.

“We know damn well who *you* are! Everyone in Valm knows of Duke Virion, the dandy who fled his nation with his tail between his legs when the Conqueror came!”

The man's appearance matched the one given to me by Virion and Say'ri of Lord Baxter, the leader of a nation named Ghoras that lay to the north of the continent. From what I had learned, Ghoras was a proud and fierce land that was filled with equally-fierce warriors, not unlike Regna Ferox. The Ghorians preached important rules of conduct, such as prizing one's comrades and family above all else. Despite their military strength, they had nonetheless crumbled against Walhart's might.

Chrom caught the lord's gaze and held it. "Duke Virion and his retainer, Cherche, were among the first to warn us of the Conqueror's campaign. The Ylislean League would not be here – coming to *your* aid – had they not done so. I would have you show them some respect."

The lord of Ghoras clenched his teeth, before slowly lowering himself back into his seat.

Yen'fay spoke as though there had been no outburst. "Well met, friends of the Resistance. We are most grateful for your efforts thus far in opposing the Conqueror's reign. We would be most honoured if you would join our forces with yours."

I caught Chrom's eye, and saw that his decision had been made.

"The honour would be ours," he said, bowing his head courteously to the foreign king. "It is within all of our interests that Walhart be stopped before the world is his to command. We of Ylissee know full well what it means to be ruled by a war-mongering tyrant."

I could sense the pain in Chrom's voice as he spoke about his late father. Frederick had turned to study his liege, his usual guarded expression replaced by one of concern.

The khans shared a nod, and both stood. Basilio was so tall as to nearly be forced to duck in order to avoid the tent roof.

Flavia spoke loudly and imperiously. "We of Regna Ferox have made our decision, and we would also combine our strengths with yours. That blasted Conqueror's ambitions will affect us all if they go unchecked."

Basilio grinned. "So let's all tear Walhart a new hole!"

I stifled a chuckle at Basilio's crude language, but the West-Khan's certain brand of diplomacy seemed to go unnoticed by the Resistance representatives. One of them, a woman with flowing crimson hair, spoke up.

"There is still the matter of who governs our combined strength," she said. "With all due respect, I would prefer if my forces remained under my command."

This must be the former queen of Darion, I realised.

Darion was a land on the eastern edge of the continent that supposedly revered the Divine Dragon almost as much as Ylissee did. They even had their own religion, the Hallowed People of Naga, as a counterpart to the Church of Naga. Furthermore, the Darionese were a people that prized their female warriors above their men, meaning that a large portion of their troops consisted of pegasus knights. Queen Laria, the woman who sat on the other end of the table from me, was a deeply respected figure throughout the continent, even after her defeat at the hands of the Conqueror.

"Your feelings echo ours," Chrom told her. "It would be most prudent to have each nation's forces under their own respective commands. I speak only for myself, but I wouldn't dare attempt to wrest control of an ally's army without their consent."

“Shame. Just think of the sheer power we would hold with a force of that size. With us at the helm, Walhart would stand no chance.”

I chose to ignore the voice’s insidious whisperings in my head.

“And then there’s the matter of funding this campaign.”

I looked to the person who had spoken, and found a man with blond hair and a shrewd expression. He looked only a few years older than Chrom, making him younger than the veteran rulers of Ghoras and Darion. And yet he seemed to hold a similar self-important attitude. Judging by the crest emblazoned upon the armour of his retainers, who stood behind him, this man was Archduke Kendric of Eridus. Eridus was a duchy to the west, and it contained the largest ports and harbours on that side of the continent. From what Virion had told me, the archduke was more of a businessman than a monarch, and his interests lay accordingly.

“As my Valmese compatriots are no doubt aware, Eridus is no longer the wealthy state it once was. We cannot be expected to foot the bill of this war.” His eyes passed over us, and he gave a smirk. “I’m sure our new friends understand.”

I understood what he was doing. He saw us newcomers as a way to further his own financial gains during the war. Unluckily for him, I was the one in charge of wartime expenditure.

“That won’t be a problem, ah…Your Lordship,” I said. “Our allies in the Theocracy of Plegia have most kindly agreed to fund our efforts in this continent. They also supplied us with numerous ships and transports, many of which are still located in Port Valm. We have more than enough gold to cover the entire Resistance movement, as well as any other frivolities.” Here, I nodded at the archduke, ensuring that he was aware of my jab.

“I thought the correct term of address for an archduke was ‘Your Grace’?”

It is.

The voice laughed.

It looked as though the archduke was about to launch a retort, but suddenly the Queen of Darion had raised an objection.

“Plegia, you say? You would ally with those who worship the Fell Dragon – with the very same people who waged war against the Halidom of Ylisse not so long ago?”

Her eyes blazed with anger, which was only quelled when Yen’fay spoke, in his soft but firm voice.

“Peace, milady,” he said. “I am sure that the people of Plegia have as much to fear from the Conqueror as any other.”

The discussion continued on for some time, all regarding various intricacies and the details of the war. It wasn’t until Chrom asked what the Resistance’s next move was that the conversation took an interesting turn.

“In spite of our significant presence here,” Yen’fay said, “many of our potential allies throughout the continent still refuse to bear arms against Walhart. Fear holds a firm grip over their hearts.”

“And is there any way to dispel that fear and unite the people?” Chrom asked.

Say’ri stood. “I may know of a way. Since ancient times, many of our people have worshipped

Naga. More precisely, we worship the divine dragon's oracle, Lady Tiki. Though most know her only as the Voice. The Voice is trapped in her temple as Walhart's prisoner. But if she were freed..."

I sat up, my interest having been piqued. "The Resistance could unite around her. Where is the Voice being held?"

"There is a shrine built in the branches of the divine Mila Tree," Yen'fay said. "She is confined there."

Chrom nodded, his face set with determination. "Then we have our plan. Let's get to it!"

"Now, hold on just a moment..."

I could hear the frustration in the exalt's voice as he addressed the archduke. "Yes, Lord Kendric, what is it?"

"I don't know whether or not you are aware, but Walhart is no fool. His scouts are scattered about the continent, and they are likely watching our movements as we speak. As soon as he realises that our army is making for the Mila Tree, he will move to intercept us with all of his might. After all, the Voice of Naga is his most valued prisoner."

Although I disliked the archduke's smug tone, I couldn't deny his point. We would have to move delicately during this campaign, in order to avoid incurring the Conqueror's wrath before we would be able to resist it.

"Then what do you suggest, milord?" Laria asked him.

"It's quite simple, really. We divide our forces into segments: with the smallest segment given the objective of releasing the Voice from her confinement. Once Lady Tiki is free, we will be able to reunite without much difficulty."

"And this 'smallest segment' you speak of," I muttered, "I assume that would consist of the Ylislean League?"

He smiled. "Indeed, Sir Tactician. How quickly you catch on."

"Then it is decided." Yen'fay's voice cut through the discussion like a blade. "The Ylislean League will to free the Voice. I will accompany them myself, along with my compatriots."

"That would be most gracious of you, sire," Frederick said.

"Meanwhile, our friends in the forces of Ghoras, Darion and Eridus will fend off any of our foe who would attempt to hinder our objective. I leave it to all of you to decide our strategy for this mission."

The king of Chon'sin stood. "We leave for the Mila Tree tomorrow morning."

And with that, he turned on his heel and marched out of the tent.

Chapter 27

Just as Yen'fay had commanded, the Resistance launched into movement the next morning. From our strategy talks (which, to my dismay, had lasted long into the night), we had agreed upon the directions of the army's movement. With the combined forces of Ghoras, Eridus and Darion, the Resistance would form a perimeter of sorts around the Mila Tree, while the Ylislean League and the Chon'sinese made to free Naga's Voice. With our forces divided, the Valmese would be unable to crush us in one fell swoop. At least, that was the plan.

Even though most of our journey west would be along the highroad, it was still going to take us a week to reach the Mila Tree. Bizarrely, Chrom seemed rather excited at the prospect of our newest mission.

"What's so *bizarre* about it?" he asked me when I pointed this out to him. We had been marching for just over a day, and his optimistic attitude was starting to grate ever so slightly. "We're going to meet Lady Tiki, herself! The Voice of Naga, the very representative of the Divine Dragon on this earth! Can you believe it?"

The exalt wasn't the only one in a good mood. Indeed, many of the Shepherds – and even some of the usually-stoic Chon'sin warriors – seemed positively elated.

"I *know*!" Lissa cried, as she skipped along beside her brother. "Gods, it's like a dream come true!"

I supposed it was because I hadn't been brought up in the Church of Naga, but there didn't seem to be anything particularly exiting to me about the prospect of meeting some divine spokesperson. If anything, I would've thought that Chrom and Lissa would be jaded by having grown up with Emmeryn – another scion of Naga's will.

I voiced these thoughts aloud. "I don't see what's so special about it. Chances are this Tiki is some 'wise' old woman who thinks she has some airy-fairy connection to the Divine Dragon."

"Ugh, you're such a killjoy sometimes, Robin!" Lissa stuck her tongue out at me, which I found oddly childish for a married woman with a son of her own. "We've spent our whole lives worshipping Naga, and now we're going to meet her Voice in the flesh! Isn't that just a *little* bit exciting?"

I shrugged. "Can't say I understand your religious fervour."

Frederick spoke in his gentle rumble. "Perhaps you would appreciate the significance of this meeting from a historical viewpoint, then? After all, it's said that Lady Tiki was a companion of the Hero-King during his quest to slay the Shadow Dragon of old."

Lissa's eyes grew as wide as saucers. "*Really*?! Wow! I never knew that!"

Chrom glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Come on, Lissa. You know Emm used to read those stories to us when we were younger, right?"

"Yeah, and I always fell asleep before she could finish!" Lissa sighed. "I loved Emm a lot, but she was a *terrible* storyteller. I much preferred the ones *you* used to read with me, Chrom!"

He chuckled. "You mean the ones about the Radiant Hero from another world? I always loved those ones, too."

I smiled fondly. “I remember reading one of those stories, as a matter of fact. Although I kind of preferred the *Jugdrali Sagas*, myself.”

“Frederick tried to get us to read those as part of our lessons,” Chrom said darkly. “You remember them, Lissa? Those huge, dusty tomes that were so heavy they made the desks creak every time we opened them.”

Both of the royal siblings made identical faces of disgust, prompting me to laugh.

“Obviously, you two don’t appreciate a quality tale when you see one.”

“A sentiment I know all too well,” Frederick muttered.

Chrom, Lissa, and the surrounding Shepherds all erupted in laughter. Despite myself, I found myself getting swept up in my companions’ good cheer. Although I still had no real desire to meet Naga’s Voice, it was good to be able to enjoy spending time with my friends.

It was on our third day of marching when we first caught sight of the Mila Tree on the horizon. At first, I wasn’t sure what we were even looking at; it looked like an inverted mountain – narrower at the base than at the peak. But as we drew closer, and the tree’s shape became clearer, none of us could help but gaze in awe at the sheer majesty of it. Even from a great distance, it was clear that the tree dwarfed all expectations of its size. Its height alone would have meant that the tree could stand alongside Ylisse’s mighty western mountains without fear of being overshadowed. But the multitude of branches and leaves meant that the tree was just as wide as it was tall, stretching for miles across at its broadest point – a forest of green that never even touched the ground. And when the sun set during the evenings of our approach, the leaves all shimmered a deep, gorgeous crimson. Even the perpetually-cynical voice in my head was left in an impressed silence.

The closer we drew, the more apparent the size of the great tree became. On the sixth day of our journey, it had all but swallowed up the sky.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt so small!” Lissa said, nervously looking up at the branches that would soon stretch above our heads.

But Frederick had more important matters on his mind. He questioned Say’ri, “So the shrine hides all the way up in its branches?”

“Aye, sir,” she replied. “A great staircase inside the trunk leads up to it. However, the empire has closed off the only route to the steps.” The princess let herself have a quiet smile. “Or perhaps ‘roots’ to the steps, I should say.”

It was the first time I had heard the serious woman joke. It didn’t seem that humour was a major facet of Chon’sin culture.

“We’ll just have to break through,” Chrom decided, looking to me. “Robin?”

I waved his concerns away. “I’m already working on a plan. If the dynasts have kept their word, then we won’t have to worry about any Valmese troops besides the ones stationed at the tree.”

Yen’fay had overheard me, and he quickly said, “Our allies will hold to their end of the deal. Of that, I have no doubt.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know, sire. You weren’t present for the negotiations with Archduke Kendric. Rarely do I ever meet such a slippery customer.”

Yen'fay's expression was hard. "I, too, have had the misfortune of dealing with the archduke. But I do not believe he will betray us. He stands to lose much should our endeavours fail."

"If you say so."

We set up camp roughly five leagues from the base of the tree. We had taken shelter between two huge roots that jutted upwards from the earth, before crossing over each other and returning to the nourishing soil. Judging by their size and length, the roots likely stretched across the entire central plain of the continent, which was a highly fertile and nutrient-rich region. Perhaps the blessings of Naga were to thank?

Under the shade of the great tree, it quickly grew dark, and everyone went early to bed. I, however, couldn't afford to relax. I hadn't yet finished drawing up my plans for the upcoming battle, and so I was hunched over my desk late into the evening, with the lamp in my tent burning brightly. Small wonder I attracted attention to myself.

The tent flap opened quietly, but it was enough to snap me out of my work-induced trance. My head turned rapidly to see who had entered, causing them to jump in surprise.

"O-oh, I'm s-sorry!" Olivia whimpered. "I-I just...Ch-Chrom wanted me to... he..."

I stood up from my chair, wincing slightly as my joints cracked and my head swam. I hadn't realised how long I had been sitting down at work for without a break.

"Calm down," I told her, trying to soothe the nervous girl. "I'm not angry at you. Now, what was that about Chrom?"

"H-he, er, he told me to tell you that...oh, what was it?" She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, no! I've completely forgotten!"

"It's okay," I said, maintaining the gentle tone I had used before. "Don't worry. It'll come to you in a moment."

The dancer took a few deep breaths, closing her eyes as she tried to recall the reason why she had been sent to my tent. Finally, she opened her eyes and fixed me with a look of determination. Apparently she had remembered.

"Chrom wanted me to tell you that he thinks you're not sleeping enough."

I rolled my eyes and sat back down in my chair. "Typical. You can tell him that I'm too busy organising *his army* to sleep."

Olivia's gaze had now dropped to the floor. "He, er, he told me not to leave you alone until you'd gone to bed. H-he said it was very important."

I groaned. "That utter *bastard*. Listen, Olivia, you don't have to go along with whatever Chrom says. You're not just some messenger for him to use as he pleases. I'll talk to him about this in the morning. *You* just run along and don't concern yourself with my sleeping schedule, alright?"

But she folded her arms and refused to budge. "He's not the only one who's worried, you know. Every time I see you in the infirmary, you look like you've been running yourself ragged."

“Well, I *am* in charge of an entire army,” I shot back.

She flinched. “S-sorry! I j-just thought that...well, maybe a proper night’s sleep might do some good?”

I immediately regretted snapping at her. She was only doing what Chrom had asked her to do.

So I said, “There’s no need to apologise. I’m sorry I got angry. But, to be entirely honest, Olivia, I have trouble sleeping at night as it is. Working on these plans and counter-plans at least allows me to be productive.”

“Chrom told me you’ve probably planned for every possible outcome in the battle ahead by now. So there’s no reason to stay awake.”

Damn him. He knows me too well!

I lifted my hands in surrender. “Alright, you win. I promise I’ll give up and try to sleep.”

The dancer sighed with relief, tension seeping out of her shoulders. “Y-you know, if you’re having trouble sleeping, I know just the thing that’ll help.”

I blinked. “Er, you do?”

She nodded. “Yes. It’s the best way I know of curing the problems of restless sleepers. Khan Basilio himself highly recommends it!”

I felt my face begin to flush. “Er, really?”

“Really! It’s the best when you just need some relief and...” Her eyes widened as she realised what she had just said, before she covered her burning face in her hands once again.

“Oh, gods, I didn’t mean it like *that*! I just meant that I had some sleeping draught brewed from Feroxi herbs, that’s all! Oh, dear, I’m *so* embarrassed!”

“Th-that’s okay!” I protested, hoping she wouldn’t take notice of my own reddened face. “It was a simple misunderstanding! A-and, if you have some sleeping draught, then I’d love some.”

Olivia peered at me through the cracks between her fingers. “Really?”

“Really!” I nodded hurriedly. “I’d appreciate it, thanks.”

“O-okay. I’ll just be a minute...”

She practically sprinted out of the tent to hide her shame.

Gods, I reflected, that girl has an amazing talent for inducing crippling second-hand embarrassment in people.

I wouldn’t have been surprised if Olivia didn’t even return at all. But, true to her word, she reappeared at my tent entrance a few minutes later and brushed it open. In her hands, she was carrying a small tray with some bottles and knives on top. I had sat down on my bed, and she came over to join me, gently placing the tray down on top of the sheets. She set about preparing the draught, blushing again when she noticed me studying her.

Eventually, I said, “You don’t have to do this, you know. You shouldn’t burden yourself with my problems.”

She smiled meekly. “Oh, it’s okay. I don’t mind. I try to find *some* way to make myself useful, seeing as dancing isn’t much good to anybody.” She made a face, as though disgusted with her own talent.

“Your dancing is spectacular,” I reassured her. “It never fails to pick *me* up, at least. I’m sure it’s the same for everyone else.”

Her face went from a pink tinge to a crimson hue. “Ha! I dance like a ham someone rolled down the stairs. Just thinking of people watching me makes me cringe.”

I was beginning to wonder if there was anything that *didn’t* make this girl cringe. She finished making the Feroxi brew, handing me a small bottle filled with a greenish liquid.

“Drink this, please.”

I did as I was told, knocking the draught back in one swallow. Graciously, Olivia took the bottle from my grasp and began packing up her things.

“I have to go,” she explained quickly. “I’m still needed in the infirmary. I’m letting Lissa, Maribelle and Cordelia have the evening off, since they’re all preparing for tomorrow’s battle.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

Olivia forced a pained smile. “It’s not much, but it’s the least I can do. Henry’s still recovering from the injury he received in training yesterday, so *somebody* has to look after him.”

“Seems like it’s either one wound or another with Henry.”

She shivered. “With the amount of time that man spends in the infirmary, I think he actually *enjoys* getting hurt in battle!”

I chuckled weakly. “Well...I can’t exactly be too doubtful of *that*, but I think he might have another reason.”

“R-really? What’s that?”

“I think he goes there to see *you*.”

The effect of my words was instantaneous. Olivia’s face turned bright scarlet, and her eyes squeezed shut with embarrassment.

“Oh, gods! I can’t have a man like him taking an interest in me just because I healed him! Even if he *is* handsome!”

I raised one eyebrow. “You think he’s handsome?”

She spluttered incoherently.

I laughed despite myself. “Sorry, sorry. I’m just teasing you.” I jerked my head at the tent flap. “Go on, then. I won’t keep you here any longer.”

Olivia nodded, never meeting my eye as she got up off of the bed and made to leave. She pushed open the flap, murmured a quick “Thanks”, before passing through and leaving me in silence.

I could feel the sleeping draught, whatever it was, beginning to work as I lay down in my bed. I was even hoping that it might drown out the nightmares, and that I might have a peaceful night’s sleep for the first time in what seemed like an age. But already, as I drifted off, I could see the

snapping of vicious jaws and teeth at the edge of my darkening vision, and I knew that it was not to be.

We stood at the edge of a basin-like ridge in the earth at the foot of the Mila tree that held a lake, observing the movements of the Valmese troops below. From our position, we could make out a great doorway carved into the tree trunk – likely the path to the Voice’s temple. But the only path between us and the door was made up of twisting roots and vines: a veritable maze of branching pathways. It would have been difficult enough to make our way across even had the roots *not* been swarming with enemy soldiers.

“This...complicates matters,” I admitted.

“Worry not, Sir Robin,” Say’ri said. “We of Chon’sin are quite familiar with the path to the temple. Concern yourself, instead, with the foe at hand.”

She pointed to a stout figure in crimson armour standing guard just in front of the doors. Even from this distance, it was obvious that the man was of sizable build. He wielded a fearsome-looking axe, hefting it over one shoulder.

“The man you see before you is General Cervantes,” Say’ri explained. “Among the Conqueror’s most trusted officers and confidants. His battle prowess is practically unparalleled; they say he has never once known defeat in battle.”

Flavia barked a laugh. “Well, then, I’m sure we can arrange for him to learn what it means to lose a battle.”

Vaike chuckled along with her. “Ol’ Teach is itching for a lesson.”

But Yen’fay growled in his low voice. “Do not underestimate Cervantes. The strength of his arm is matched only by the length of his whiskers, and of his belt. It is said only the southern general and Walhart himself can trump his might.”

Chrom’s eyes surveyed the general. “We’ll see about that.”

A cry suddenly went up from the Valmese below.

“Fie!” Say’ri cried, her hands reaching for the blade at her hip. “I fear we have been spotted.”

“Fear not,” Yen’fay said, similarly arming himself. “I shall lead the charge. Follow me, comrades!”

Immediately, Yen’fay’s personal entourage were by his side, and they charged as one down the side of the basin and leaped onto a nearby root. Not slowing down even once, the Chon’sin warriors sprinted along the root and began to engage the enemy.

All around me, the Shepherds were preparing to join the fight.

“Everyone,” I shouted, making my voice heard, “follow Yen’fay’s lead. Try to avoid the enemy general if you can. And watch out for any fliers.”

“Do not worry!” I heard Virion answer. “I shall deal with those aerial pests myself!”

“I’m counting on it.”

Chrom gave the order to charge, and he led us down the path and onto the roots, just as the Chon’sinese had done moments before. I was still trying to wrap my mind around the layout of the roots, which only made strategising more difficult.

“Sumia, Cordelia and Cherche,” I called, “take out those mages! And I want Gaius, Panne, Olivia and Henry to keep the enemy archers occupied! Keep them off our fliers!”

“Sure thing, Bubbles.”

“I-I’ll do my best...”

“Ricken and Miriel, use your Wind spells against any flying enemies that Virion hasn’t already dealt with.”

“Got it!”

“Cavaliers, advance! But mind your footing!”

“Understood,” Frederick replied, lifting his lance high and charging towards our foes. Sully and Stahl followed him, moving in tandem as they always did.

“Everyone else, stay behind the front lines! Yen’fay and his warriors will clear a path!”

I heard Chrom ask from beside me, “You want me to take care of this Cervantes fellow?”

I blinked. “Oh, er, actually I was going to have the mages deal with him. Metal armour like his offers little resistance against magic.”

I caught a glimpse of the look in the exalt’s eyes, and I sighed.

“And yet, you’re going to go up against him anyway.”

Chrom offered me a smile and a shrug that was more like a tilt of the head. “Sorry, Robin, but I need to know what I’m up against. This Cervantes is one of Walhart’s top men. If I want to begin to understand the Conqueror’s strength, I’ll need to fight the general myself. There’s no better way to get the measure of a man than to face him in battle.”

I shook my head and turned to face forwards again. “I know better than to argue with you when you get this way.”

So I stuck to my leader’s side, as always. Even then, in the heat of battle, I couldn’t help but feel guilty for hiding secrets from him. I was supposed to be his trusted confidant, and yet I couldn’t tell him the simple truth...

“That you’re a traitor,” the voice said, finishing my thought for me.

I was snapped out of my daze by a spear that hurtled past my field of vision, missing my head by less than a foot. I jumped back, preparing a spell for the Valmese soldier who had thrown the spear, who was standing some distance away on a root above our own. But the unfortunate soldier was blasted away by an Elfire spell before I could finish casting mine. A quick glance over my shoulder told me my saviour had been Tharja, whose efforts I acknowledged with a nod.

“Thanks,” I said.

“He deserved worse,” she replied, with a slight sniff of contempt.

“Stay focused, Robin!”

I winced at Chrom’s reprimand. It was true, of course – I *had* been careless. But we were moving swiftly towards the doors at this point, with the Valmese troops that weren’t cut down by the Chon’sinese being easily dealt with by the Shepherds. It seemed that, despite their relative skill, the Valmese relied on quantity over quality. Cervantes may have been a feared general, but it was clear that his preferred tactic was merely to have his men bullrush the enemy. With that in mind, I formulated a new strategy.

“Everyone, spread out!” I yelled over the din of battle. “Use the roots around us to flank the enemy! Try to avoid facing the brunt of their attack!”

I was thankful that nobody stopped to question my decision, whether or not they saw the wisdom in it. The Shepherds did as they were told, and not a moment too soon. As soon as Chrom and I had clambered onto a nearby, smaller root, there was a tumult of voices as another horde of Valmese soldiers crested an upwards crook in the large root we had previously been standing on. They found themselves without anyone to charge at, while our troops had already begun to surround them. Already, some of the Shepherds were firing down at them: Nowi with her dragonbreath and the mages with their spells. The enemy didn’t stand a chance.

A quick tap on my left shoulder made me turn to face Chrom, who was pointing off down the slope of the root we were currently standing on. At the foot of the slope was the door, with Cervantes still in his spot before it. All of the Valmese troops between us and the general were being kept occupied by Yen’fay’s warriors, giving the two of us a straight path to our primary foe.

“I’m going to run for the general,” Chrom told me, prompting me to sigh again.

“Alright. I’ll watch your back.”

Chrom sprinted down the root, with me following in his wake. I heard the shouts of the Valmese all around us as they quickly realised our intentions, but the Chon’sinese were too fast for our foes to intercept our course towards the doors.

Cervantes watched us as we descended towards him, and he slowly raised his weapon.

“I am Cervantes,” he rumbled through his visor. “Most stalwart general of His Imperial Highness, Walhart! Fight me, and learn the true meaning of fear!”

I blinked. Had he just said ‘beard’?

Chrom, too, looked confused by the large man’s words, but our thoughts were interrupted when the general barked a laugh.

“So! Judging by that mark on your flesh, you must be the exalt! I should consider myself honoured that you would face me yourself! Why, at the very mention of my name, most men would tremble in fear!”

I didn’t understand why he kept blathering on about his beard, but Chrom had already had enough.

“Tell me, fiend, what do you achieve by invading kingdoms and bullying them into submission?”

Cervantes laughed once again. “Do you even need ask, whelp? Emperor Walhart is destined to rule this world, plain and simple!”

And with that, he struck. The general's axe swung towards Chrom's head faster than either of us had anticipated. Chrom was able to lift Falchion quickly enough to parry the blow, wincing as the force of the blow made his bones judder. Taking a few steps back, Chrom tried again.

"But to what end?"

"Irrelevant! Walhart's mind is beyond the grasp of common men!"

Cervantes struck again, but Chrom was fast enough this time to leap backwards out of the general's reach.

The exalt pressed his questioning. "So you don't even know what you're fighting for?"

Cervantes tilted his head back ever so slightly, as if to survey Chrom through his visor. Because of that, I was able to catch a glimpse of his beard, which was admittedly as impressive as everyone had claimed.

"I tend to my own beard, boy. A soldier does not question orders. But he gives his loyalty – and maybe his life – in the service of greater men."

Chrom was being pressed back now, almost to my position.

"Great men?" he echoed, incredulousness evident in his tone. "Is living only to conquer so great an ambition?"

"Keep him talking, Chrom," I whispered to him, barely even loud enough for the exalt to hear. Under my breath I was already beginning the chant for a new, powerful spell.

"This is that Arctthunder spell, right? Not very impressive, now, is it? For a man of such considerable...stature as Cervantes?"

Not now. I'm trying to concentrate.

"What could be greater?!" Cervantes boomed. "Once I had dreams myself of commanding a nation...but Walhart? Aye, he dreams bigger. He would rule the entire world! Mine is nothing compared to the moxie of the Conqueror. I am but a single tiny hair on the beard of a flea in his great moustache! Have you not tasted the thrill of being part of something bigger than yourself?"

The voice persisted. *"But what's point of trying to concentrate your efforts into something so mediocre? Cervantes may be a braggart, but he's a formidable foe. What if a simple Arctthunder spell isn't strong enough to take him down? You have the element of surprise, you know. You can't afford to lose that: you might end up getting yourself or Chrom hurt. So, why not try something a bit more...potent?"*

You're talking about Dark Magic.

"The good general will never see it coming."

Chrom would never forgive me.

"He forgave you not being able to save his sister. He forgave you lying to him about your origins. What's one more promise you decline to keep?"

But Chrom hadn't noticed my internal conflict. His eyes were locked on his opponent, narrowed distastefully. "Not at the price of inflicting cruelty and suffering, no."

Cervantes straightened. “Then we have nothing more to discuss. Prepare to learn the meaning of the word ‘beard’.”

The voice hesitated. *“He definitely said ‘beard’ that time.”*

“*Fear!*” Cervantes spluttered. “I mean fear!”

The two warriors resumed their duel.

“Now, what was I saying again?”

Something about promises I’ve declined to keep.

“Ah, of course. Look, I know you don’t want Chrom to find out that you’re betraying him to dark forces he knows almost nothing about. I’m sure he’d be seriously shocked by that particular revelation. So, relatively speaking, he won’t be too upset if you perform just a tiny bit of dark magic here and now.”

I’m not following your logic. And anyway, I haven’t prepared any spells – no reagents, no knife. Nothing at all.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” the voice reassured me. *“Just let me take the lead for a moment. I’ll sort it all out for you.”*

Wh-what?! Not a chance! I’m not giving you control over my body!

“It’s my body, too, you know.”

I don’t care! Leave me alone!

I tripped over the words of the incantation, and immediately felt a numbing sensation as the spell that had been building up fizzled out.

I swore repeatedly as I tried to recover, keeping an eye on Chrom and Cervantes as they fought on. Chrom had learned to avoid the great general’s strikes rather than parry them head-on, but the narrow space of the roots beneath his feet gave him little room to manoeuvre. I had thought Chrom’s speed would give him the advantage in this battle, but I hadn’t anticipated just how formidable Cervantes would be. I was beginning to panic.

Just then, there was a shout from above – a female voice, with a familiar tone. I glanced upwards to see a blur of grey and purple silk as Say’ri leaped down to join the fray. She landed gracefully, turning and delivering a high kick to the general’s helmet, knocking him off-balance. Quick as a flash, Chrom pressed his advantage, sprinting forward with Falchion bared and swiping with the holy blade. Although Falchion couldn’t fully pierce his armour, the force of Chrom’s strike was enough to send Cervantes reeling backwards. The general didn’t realise until he had one foot over the edge that he had taken a few steps too many.

We watched as Cervantes toppled over the side of the root, screaming as he went, the weight of his hulking armour dragging him down. There was a hideous crashing sound, prompting us to peer down at where the general had fallen. Fortunately for Cervantes, he had landed on a lower root, not too far below our own, and was already beginning to recover. He craned his aching neck up at our position – just in front of the door – and realised he had been defeated.

“All units, retreat!” Cervantes bellowed, with some degree of reluctance. “The day is lost! Retreat, I say!”

Say'ri was about to jump down and finish the job, but I held out a hand to stop her.

"Leave him," I said. "They won't get far. Our allies in the Resistance have established a perimeter around the Mila Tree. Not one Valmese soldier gets in or out."

Say'ri gritted her teeth, but she nodded and said, "Very well, Sir Robin. I shall trust in your judgement."

And so we watched as Cervantes scurried away, muttering something about his 'invincible moustache', while his surviving men followed suit.

Before long, the Shepherds and the Chon'sin warriors alike had gathered by the great doors. Wounds were being nursed, weapons and armour being tended to. Once I had finished seeing that there were no serious casualties, I tuned in to the discussion between the leaders.

"You did well, great exalt," Yen'fay addressed Chrom with a curt bow. "We have struck a great blow to the Conqueror's forces this day."

"I couldn't have done it without your help, sire," Chrom told him, acknowledging the praise with a lowering of his head.

Say'ri, on the other hand, was almost ecstatic. "Marry, what fighting! I almost pity the enemies of the Ylissean League."

"Now, hold on," Basilio boomed. "We haven't won the war just yet. In fact, we still haven't accomplished what we *came* here for!"

"Freeing the Voice," Flavia finished for him.

The Chon'sin princess seemed to stiffen, catching herself.

"You are quite right, noble khans," she said. "I forget myself. Forgive my impatience and haste."

Basilio chuckled. "Now, if only *all* young folks today were so diligent and respectful to their elders."

"Can you open the door to the shrine?" Chrom asked Yen'fay, who nodded.

"Of course. Stand back."

A massive, steel lock had been placed over the doors, with thick chains holding them shut. Slowly, Yen'fay drew his long, slender sword from its sheath at his hip. And, with one fluid movement that was almost too fast for my eye to perceive, he swung the blade and cleaved the lock in two. It fell to the floor, in pieces, and the chains unravelled. With a gentle push, the doors swung open, creaking softly.

"Be warned," Yen'fay said, "it is some distance from here to the Voice's shrine. Those who are fatigued from today's struggle may rest."

And with that, the king stepped through the doorway and into the darkness within the tree trunk. I met Chrom's eye, and he nodded. Together, and with the majority of the Shepherds and Chon'sinese behind us, we entered the Mila Tree.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The interior of the Mila Tree was more like a great tower than the inside of a trunk. There was a single, spiralling staircase within that wrapped around the trunk's circumference, having been carved into the tree likely centuries ago. The stairs wound upwards, making up the only path to the Voice's shrine.

Yen'fay had told us that the climb would be long, but we had still all underestimated just how many steps there were. The Mila Tree had looked gargantuan from the outside, but I couldn't fully appreciate how incredibly *tall* the thing was until I was inside, climbing up step after step until I lost count. What was worse, the interior of the tree was kept insulated by the thick bark of the trunk, meaning that our journey upward was undertaken in the sweltering heat. My feet were aching, and none of us had any idea how much further there was to climb.

"How many stairs are there in a case of stairs?" I heard Lissa whinge. "Because I'm *so* sick of this stupid staircase!"

"Hear hear, darling," Maribelle all but wheezed. "I sincerely doubt that all of this climbing is beneficial for my health! Or my feet, for that matter!"

"Then perhaps I might carry you, my love?"

"That would be most helpful, dear Virion," Maribelle crooned. "By all means, take me in your arms. None of that 'piggyback' nonsense that Lissa is so fond of."

True to his word, Virion picked up his wife in his arms and carried her up the steps like the gallant gentleman he so claimed to be.

"He's going to regret that decision in a few hundred steps," Gaius muttered into my ear. I could only nod in response.

Meanwhile, Lissa was complaining, still. "Hey, Lon'qu, how come *you* won't carry me like that?"

I saw the hardened Feroxi warrior quiver.

"Look, I said I was sorry about the last time," Lissa said. "It'll just be for a little while!"

"You didn't have to come along, you know," Chrom reminded her. "You could've stayed below with the others."

Lissa pouted. "No way am I going to miss out on an audience with Lady Tiki!"

"Then hush," her brother ordered her, placing a sweaty finger over her lips and causing her to gag.

All in all, the climb took several hours. Only the Chon'sinese seemed unaffected by either the heat or the strain of having climbed so many steps. The staircase took us up to the very top of the trunk, just above the canopy, from which we were able to look out across the entirety of the central plains. To the east, we saw the highroad that had taken us here, connecting the Mila Tree with Valm Harbour. To the north was a rugged-looking landscape that I knew belonged to Ghoras. To the south lay another highroad, this one stretching off down the length of the great continent, dividing the plains in half. And to the west, we could just about make out the fringes of the

Valmese nation – or, at least, what had once been the Valmese nation’s limits before Walhart’s ambition had led to the expansion of their borders.

The staircase stopped just in front of a stone dais, the likes of which would likely have looked out of place in Ylisse; the shrine was small and simple, and differed greatly from the grand temples of the Church of Naga. A great stone monolith stood in the centre of the dais, surrounded by a multitude of smaller standing stones. There didn’t seem to be any sign of the Voice.

“Lady Tiki!” Say’ri called. “Are you here? Prithee answer!”

For a moment, there was silence. Just as I was starting to wonder if the Conqueror’s forces had spirited the Voice away, there was movement from the far side of the monolith. Shuffling sounds reached my ears, and then the Voice appeared from behind the great stone, stepping gracefully out into the sun.

They had told me that Lady Tiki was old – old enough to have fought alongside the Hero-King during his lifetime. And it was known that she was filled with the wisdom of the millennia that had gone by since that era. In my mind, I had therefore pictured an ancient, sagely woman, with a face like rock and a frail, wizened body.

What I hadn’t expected to see was a woman with a soft, youthful, cherubic face, her lips plump and red, with eyes that were the same vivid green as her hair. She blinked in the strong sunlight, her long lashes fluttering over those beautiful eyes. Her hair was tied back, revealing her slender, pointed ears.

A manakete, I realised. *Just like Nowi*.

She wore a garment of the deepest red, complete with a soft pink cape. My eyes were drawn to every curve, taking in the shape of her body. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. My stomach was fluttering, and I was starting to feel light-headed. And I was certain it wasn’t because of the long climb up to the shrine.

“*Oh, no...*”

The Voice’s lips parted silently, before her mouth spread wider and wider, until I was certain her jaw was about to crack. She let out a loud, ponderous yawn that, even in my spellbound state, made me want to lie down, curl up and sleep for a couple of decades.

Say’ri sighed with relief, as though this behaviour was the norm. “Ah, my lady. I’m so relieved to see you’re all right.”

As one, the Chon’sinese, including the royal siblings, dropped to one knee and bowed their heads. I was so stunned that I didn’t realise we were meant to imitate them until I felt Lissa’s hand tugging me down.

Tiki’s lips spread in a sweet smile, and she lifted her hand in a gesture that was clearly directing us all to stand back up. Still unable to drag my eyes away from this gorgeous woman, I got unsteadily to my feet, noticing my comrades doing the same out of the corner of my eye.

Chrom stepped forward. “So you are Lady Tiki? She who speaks for the Divine Dragon?”

The Voice surveyed Chrom quietly for several seconds, as though taking in his appearance, before nodding.

“That is correct, young exalt,” she said. Her voice was soft and gentle, and filled with good humour.

“You...know of me, Lady Tiki?”

“I know of your bloodline. You carry the Brand of the Exalt, as well as the sacred blade, Falchion, which was forged from the fang of Naga herself. Your name is...Chrom, correct? Even from my lofty prison, I hear much of your exploits.”

The Voice tilted her head. When she smiled again, this time I could see there was a sadness to her expression. “You have inherited the legacy of someone I once held dear. But he is gone now. Lost during my endless sleep...”

Her eyes closed for a moment, as though she was suppressing some deep emotion. Heartbreak? Or loneliness? But when they opened again, all trace of that emotion had vanished.

“Do you yet possess the Fire Emblem?” she asked. “It should have been passed down through your family.”

Chrom blinked. “I...” He shook himself, before detaching the ancient shield from its usual position on his arm. “Yes, I have it...”

Tiki’s eyes glittered with joy as she gazed upon the Fire Emblem. “Ah! What relief to know it has not been lost.” Her expression shifted. “...But where are the Gemstones? I see only Argent.”

I flinched. *The Gemstones*. Just as Validar had told me. The very Gemstones my father had ordered me to find and bring to him. He had spoken true after all.

Chrom, on the other hand, was evidently confused. “Gemstones?”

“Yes, there are five of them,” the Voice explained. “Argent, Sable, Gules, Azure, and Vert. Each holds a portion of Naga's power. When mounted upon the Emblem, they allow one to perform the Awakening.”

“The rite by which the first exalt channelled the Divine Dragon's power,” Frederick murmured, his forehead creased even more than usual as he considered this latest development.

“The very same,” Tiki said. “With the Fire Emblem's power, the exalt was able to defeat Grima.”

So...that must be why Validar wants the Gemstones, I realised. He can't have them falling into the 'wrong hands', for fear that they'll be used to defeat the Fell Dragon.

Tiki went on. “But such power was too much for men, and so the Gemstones were scattered. I kept Azure here with me.”

A thought struck me then. Wait a moment...why does Validar need all of the Gemstones? Wouldn't it be much easier to take just one and hide it away? That way, the Fire Emblem's full power could never be used against Grima. What's his game...?

So caught up in my thoughts as I was, I barely even heard Yen'fay's next comment.

“Our kingdom had safeguarded Vert for generations. But the gem was recently stolen by Walhart's men.”

“Then it's probably in Valm by now,” Chrom said. “That just leaves two more Gemstones. Milady, do you know where they might be?”

But the Voice shook her head. “The remaining Gemstones, Sable and Gules, are no longer known to me. They may have been taken long ago, at the time of the Schism.”

To my surprise, it was Khan Basilio who spoke next. “Regna Ferox was founded during the Schism. As were most all nations in the realm, I believe.”

It was true: the Schism had been a time of great political upheaval on the Ylissean continent, although according to historical sources the continent had been known by a different name at the time. Apparently, there had been a great surge of natural disasters that caused a shift in the continent’s landscape, radically changing the position and location of many of the nations on it. As a result of the changing borders, territorial squabbles became commonplace, until only three countries were left standing. But the tensions remaining between these newly-founded nations would lead to many conflicts – which were largely the source of the enmity between Ylisse and Plegia that lasted to this day.

Lissa piped up. “Wait, does that mean you guys have one of the Gemstones, Basilio?”

The East-Khan barked a laugh. “As if anyone would entrust the oaf with such a thing!”

But Basilio cracked a grin at his fellow khan. “Actually, it’s true – we did keep one: Gules.” He took one look at Flavia’s unimpressed face and said, “Did I never inform you?”

“You most certainly did not,” she replied.

“Hmm...must have slipped my mind.”

Something in Basilio’s tone made me glance questioningly at him, only to find his face revealing nothing.

“Regardless, yes. The West-Khans once safeguarded Gules. But it was lost long before my lifetime.”

Again, that odd note in his voice. Before I could address Basilio, I was distracted once again by the soft tones that belonged to Tiki.

“Here,” she said, holding out a gleaming, blue jewel that she had produced. “Take Azure, exalted one. With it, you possess two of the five Gemstones.”

Chrom accepted the gift, slotting it into one of the empty holes on the face of the Fire Emblem. But before he could even thank the Voice for her assistance, she told him, “Now you must seek out the others and perform the Awakening. Our world must be defended from Grima at all costs!”

This declaration from the Naga’s Voice caused a serious stir amongst the Shepherds, Feroxi and Chon’sinese alike. Too shamefaced to say anything, I merely listened as Chrom said, “But, Lady Tiki, we’re confused. I...we thought Grima’s power was sealed away.”

She bowed her head gravely. “Yes, but ever since, there have been those who would change that. Grima’s life force grows even now, and with it, the long shadows of despair.”

I could hear the anxiety creeping into Chrom’s voice. “When will he return? And where?”

But Tiki only shook her head. “I cannot know these things. But I can feel his presence... It looms, closer and closer... This task is a heavy burden, but as he of exalted blood, it must fall to you, Chrom.”

Although I was not looking at Chrom’s face, I could nonetheless tell that his expression was troubled. Eventually, he said, “I understand. Thank you for all your help.”

The Voice smiled graciously, looking from Chrom and the Chon'sin royals to the khans, before sweeping her gaze across each of the Shepherds in turn. Inevitably, her eyes fell upon me, and I saw her falter.

She gasped. "Ah! You...you have it..."

I took a step backwards in surprise. "I-I'm sorry?"

"You have power...like mine," she breathed, and my stomach lurched with a sensation that was different entirely from the queasy flutterings from before.

My mouth was opening and closing, but I couldn't form any words. I must have looked stunned. Although I was still holding Tiki's gaze, I could feel a sea of eyes watching me. I was sure, without even having to turn around, that Frederick's stare was boring holes into the back of my head. Out of the corner of my eye, I could even see Chrom staring at me with a look of concern.

Despite my fear, the Voice was the first to break the spell. She blinked rapidly, raising a slender hand to her forehead.

"Forgive me...I am still groggy from my slumber. My words outpace my thoughts."

But her words sounded oddly forced. I wasn't the only one who noticed, for Say'ri quickly asked, "Are you alright, my lady?"

Tiki nodded, her beautiful face creased with a mild frown. "I am fine...just very tired..."

After taking a moment to calm herself, the Voice drew herself back up to her fullest height and addressed those gathered to see her one last time.

"I haven't the strength to join you in the fray. Not yet. But I will call the people together, in prayer, for an end to this conflict."

Yen'fay gave one of his curt nods, although his lips had curled slightly upwards in a grateful smile. "That is all we ask, my lady. Please, do not strain yourself on our behalf."

Tiki gave another one of those amazing smiles. "Thank you, Yen'fay. And thank you all for rescuing me from my captivity. You each have my gratitude."

Her eyes met mine one final time, and I was unable to say anything in response. Instead, I turned and walked away, joining my fellow Shepherds as we began our long journey back down the trunk.

We returned to our camp some distance away from the tree trunk later that evening, thoroughly exhausted by the day's events. The climb up and down the Mila Tree, in particular, had worn almost everyone out, and we were all quickly dismissed for the night.

But despite the ache in my muscles and the weariness in my bones, I found myself unable to sleep. Not in fear of my recurring nightmares (although their presence still lingered on the edge of my subconscious), but rather because of what I had learned today of the Gemstones and Fell Dragon. I had filed the information Tiki had given us about the Gemstones away without thinking, and I cursed myself for even doing so. I was still too afraid of Validar's threats to consider turning against him.

I'm such a coward...

What was more, the face of that beautiful manakete kept swimming before my eyes. Never in my life had I met someone so captivating – not even Tharja had had such an effect on me. And unlike the Dark Mage, Tiki exuded this wonderful feeling of grace and tranquillity. I wanted desperately to share in that feeling, to forget all my troubles and strife and just lose myself in her presence.

I kept expecting the voice in my head to interject, to complain about my ridiculous sentimentality. But it never did. In fact, ever since my meeting with Naga's Voice, my *own* voice had been unusually silent. There was something peculiar in that, I knew.

Wretchedly, I twisted and turned in my cot, knowing that it was entirely pointless to even try and sleep. My thoughts were too occupied for me to rest, and so I reluctantly heaved myself up out of my bed, pulled on my cloak and left the tent.

Under the shade of the Mila Tree, the late night air was cold. I shivered, pulling my cloak tighter around me, wishing I hadn't forgone my shirt. All around me, the camp was as silent as the grave. I knew there were the usual guards posted around our perimeter, but they were clearly keeping to themselves. I was considering going for a walk to the edge of camp and back to clear my thoughts, but I was caught off-guard by the sound of voices nearby. Searching for the source of these voices, I spotted a flickering shadow against the canvas of a tent some distance away. Creeping slowly and quietly towards the shadow, I cocked my head to the side and tried to listen in on the conversation.

"...watch...temper..."

"I would...didn't..."

The voices became clearer and clearer as I approached. It sounded like there were two people, and I recognised one of them as being Yen'fay. Was he meeting with one of his advisors? But why so late at night? Maybe it was a scout who had just returned from a mission into enemy territory?

"Oh, my dear Yen'fay..."

Now that certainly didn't *sound* like one of the king's subordinates. Not with such a snide, condescending tone.

By then, I had reached the tent where I had seen the shadow. I pressed my back flat against the tent wall, almost holding my breath in an attempt to be entirely silent.

"I don't see why you have any business here in this place, Excellus." That was Yen'fay.

The man called Excellus spoke, in a nasty, high-pitched voice. "Now, now. I come all the way from my cosy castle home just to see you and *this* is the treatment I receive? I would have thought you a better host!"

"State your purpose," Yen'fay commanded. "Else leave immediately. I have little time for your games of wit and words."

Excellus tutted. "Typical. No manners at all." He paused. "I trust you haven't forgotten about our little, shall we say, *deal*?" The strange man made the word drip with sinister implications.

"...I have not."

"Then I would have you answer. You know how our friend Walhart doesn't like to be kept waiting."

My heart lurched, and I suppressed a gasp with all my strength. There was no way! Yen'fay, one of the most proud and honourable men I had ever met, couldn't have been working for Valm. It was inconceivable!

"I believe I already *gave* you my answer, Excellus. I want no part of your schemes and machinations."

"Hmph!"

At the stranger's haughty grunt, I slowly turned my head and leaned outwards from my position, straining to catch a glimpse of him. I saw a clearing in the gap between two tents, with a lantern placed upright in the very centre, sending shadows spinning onto the surrounding canvasses. Yen'fay was standing with his back slightly turned in my direction, leaving his noble face framed in darkness. On the opposite side of the lantern was the man he had been speaking to – Excellus. At first, I wasn't certain that I was even looking at a man at all: the stranger wore a flowing robe that was embroidered with gold, and his arms were adorned with precious and expensive jewellery. His delicate, spindly fingers tapered off into slender, painted nails. And with the lamplight flickering as it was, the shadows played over his feminine face – now frozen in a ugly, displeased expression.

"'Schemes and machinations', you say?" Excellus hissed. "I'll have you know that my so-called *schemes* are what hold the balance of this war in check! You would do well to remember that, you filthy ingrate!"

When Yen'fay spoke once again, although his voice had never risen above much more than a whisper, his tone was tinged with steel. "Leave, now. Before I cut you down where you stand, worm."

"'Worm', is it?! Well, we'll see just how dangerous one *worm* can be! You will regret this night!"

And with that final screech, Excellus swept his hands, his fingers glowing with magical energy. There was a blinding flash and a blast of heat that singed the very ground at the man's feet, and then he was gone. Excellus had vanished, with only the circle of burnt grass leaving any trace that he had been there.

I gritted my teeth. I had seen Validar perform a similar trick more than once. Any connection to the Plegian king, even one as tentative as this, was enough cause for concern.

I heard Yen'fay breathe a quick sigh, although whether it was out of weariness or relief I could not say. Thinking fast, I crept away from my hiding spot and retreated to a safe distance, before calling out towards the king's location.

"Hello? Is there somebody there?"

I made my footsteps deliberately louder than necessary to warn Yen'fay of my approach. I drew past the tent I had hidden behind only moment before, and stepped into the clearing. Yen'fay's hand was at his side, gripping the hilt of his sword, but he hesitated when he saw me, his eyes widening ever so slightly.

"Sir Robin?"

I feigned surprise. "Ah, sire, I didn't realise it was you. I saw a flash of light from behind this tent and feared the worst. I thought an enemy mage might have somehow made its way into our midst." I bowed my head. "Forgive me, sire."

“Do not apologise for your own diligence, sir,” Yen’fay told me, loosening his grip on the blade. “It is only natural for a tactician to be wary of such dangers.” He glanced down at the lamp at his feet and said, “I merely knocked over my lantern. That was likely the cause of the light you saw.”

I nodded, smiling with false relief as I pointed towards the ring of scorched earth. “I see. That explains why the grass is all singed.”

I saw Yen’fay’s expression tighten.

“But, if you don’t mind me asking, sire...why are you out here so late at night? Dawn can surely only be hours away.”

“I...found slumber elusive,” the king admitted. “I felt that some fresh air would help clear my mind.”

“Of course, sire. In truth, that’s why I’m here, too. I can’t stop thinking about what Lady Tiki spoke of – the Gemstones, and the possible resurrection of the Fell Dragon.”

Yen’fay lowered his head gravely. “Indeed. Such concerns weigh heavy on my own mind, also. I fear that, even should we prevail against Walhart’s ambitions, we may face a greater threat in the years to come.”

I forced myself not to shudder at the accuracy of his claims, deciding instead to change the subject. My eyes dropped to Yen’fay’s hand, still lingering out of habit by his blade. “That sword you carry...I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You speak of Amatsu, the Seven-Branched Sword. It has been the trusted companion to the king of Chon’sin for generations. My father gave it to me before his passing years ago, and it has remained at my side through each and every battle.” His eyes narrowed, and his teeth were suddenly bared in a grimace. “And yet...not even the blade of my ancestors could halt the might of the Conqueror. I faced his greatest general in combat, and gripped the great Amatsu with false confidence. Because of my own weakness, my fatherland fell to Walhart’s ceaseless campaign of terror.” He removed the sword from its sheath, and I took a few steps back as he held it in front of him. Yen’fay gazed upon the blade, Amatsu, with an expression of regret and disgust.

“Perhaps I am no longer worthy of wielding such a hallowed weapon,” he breathed.

But I shook my head. “No, Yen- I mean, sire. By the sounds of it, this general of Walhart’s is no mere bladesman. I’m sure even the proudest and fiercest of Chon’sin’s swordmasters would have struggled to best him. So don’t let this lone defeat haunt you that way. Instead, you should let it drive you. Wield Amatsu to win back the land of your forefathers. That way, you can win back the honour you lost.”

For a moment, I was afraid I had gone too far in trying to assuage him. But, gradually, his expression began to soften.

“You...are wise, Sir Robin. There is an old proverb: ‘a man cannot move forward if he is always looking back’. In my shame, I had forgotten the words of my people. But you, sir, have shown me the error of my ways.” Yen’fay’s eyes blazed with determination. “I will not let anything stop me from reclaiming what I have lost. Not even my own limitations.”

Although I was slightly taken-aback by the man’s swift change, I gave him a reassuring nod. “Good. Now, I think I should return to my tent. We’re due to meet with our scouts tomorrow morning.”

“Of course. Sleep well, Sir Robin.”

I set off, passing through the gap between the two tents one final time. But just as I was about to leave, I glanced back over my shoulder.

“And sire? Please...make sure you remember who your allies are.”

I never saw his expression, having departed before he could question my words. Although I was returning to my tent, I knew that it would in all likelihood be even more difficult to fall asleep after what I had seen and heard. This Excellus person was obviously connected to the Valmese. And Yen’fay had apparently been offered a deal with him. While it appeared that the Chon’sin king had refused, the fact that the two men were in contact at all was still enough to arouse suspicion. And it seemed as though they were both quite familiar with each other. Regardless of how genuine Yen’fay had been during our brief conversation that night, his correspondence with Excellus still was reason enough to mistrust him. But without any proof of Yen’fay’s disloyalty, or context for what the two men had been discussing, there was nothing I could do for the time being.

All I could do in the meantime was wait.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so I can finally reveal who Robin's love interest in this story is. If it wasn't already obvious from the above chapter, it's Tiki!

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